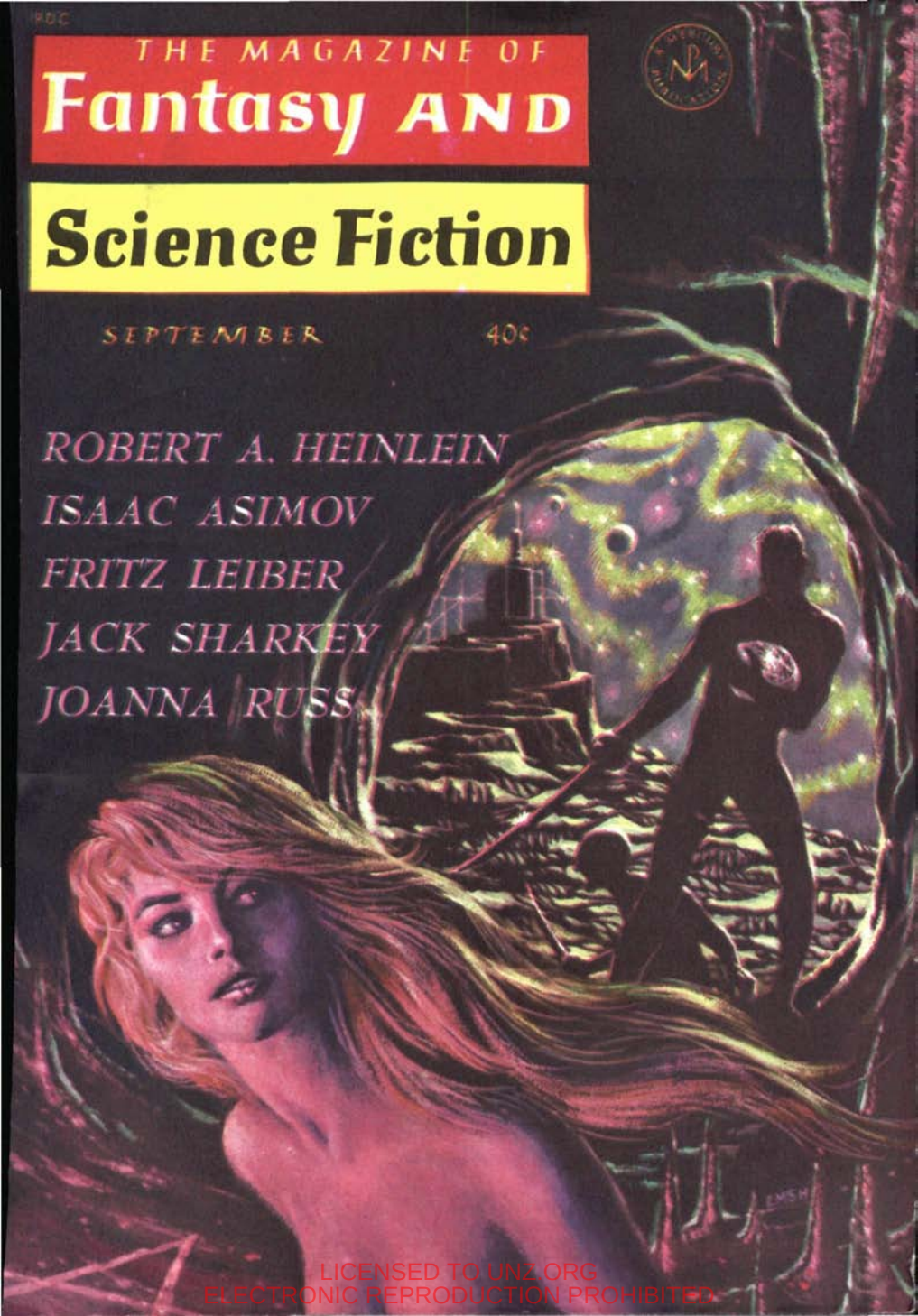

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER *Including Venture Science Fiction*

There Is Another Shore, You Know, Upon The Other Side	JOANNA RUSS	5
Ferdinand Feghoot: LXV	GRENDEL BRIARTON	16
Glory Road (*conclusion*)	ROBERT A. HEINLEIN	17
Books	AVRAM DAVIDSON	90
The Man Who Feared Robots	HERBERT W. FRANKE	94
Collector's Item	JACK SHARKEY	97
Science: Who's Out There?	ISAAC ASIMOV	102
Unholy Hybrid	WILLIAM BANKIER	112
Attrition (*verse*)	WALTER H. KERR	119
237 Talking Statues, Etc.	FRITZ LEIBER	120
In this issue . . . Coming next month		4
F&SF Marketplace		129
Cover by Emsh (illustrating "Glory Road")		

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In this issue . . .

. . . concludes the new **ROBERT A. HEINLEIN** novel; if you have missed the first two parts, don't fret, just send us money. European scientist and Science Fiction writer **HERBERT W. FRANKE** puts in a first appearance which is short but somewhat frightening; Canadian author **WILLIAM BANKIER** turns up for the second time and also chills your blood (well, it's a hot summer!). **JACK SHARKEY** will make you chuckle, and **FRITZ LEIBER** will make you think. And there is a haunting tale by **JOANNA RUSS.**

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. . . is our perenially-famed October *All-Star Issue.* It will contain the first **ALFRED BESTER** story here in a long (too long) time, another **ZENNA HENDERSON** account of The People, the latest by **RICHARD MATHESON,** a provoking and insanely logical tale by **MACK REYNOLDS.** Plus a fascinating article by **L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP,** a longer poem by the great **ARCHIBALD MACLEISH,** and (ahem, blush) something by **AVRAM DAVIDSON.** Cover by **CHESLEY BONESTELL.** Reserve now at your newsdealer's . . . or take advantage of our subscription offers, why don't you?

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Joanna Russ is young and nice and has very blue eyes. She was born and raised in the Bronx, only three blocks from the Botanical Gardens and the Zoo, and says that she spent most of her childhood in those two places. When she sold her first story (NOR CUSTOM STALE, F&SF, September, 1959) she was a student at the Yale Drama School; later she was Assistant to the Director of the American Institute of Physics—a duality of interest appropriate to one who is a former Westinghouse Science Scholar, Phi Beta Kappa, and winner of both the Browning and Shakespeare Essay Prizes (Cornell). Miss Russ's second story for us was the memorable MY DEAR EMILY (F&SF, July 1962), an outstanding treatment of the vampire motif; and a better one—we say it with drawn wolfbane—than "Dracula." Her story here is on a sombre theme, some may think; yet, as its title indicates, it is bright with hope. And withal shines with beauty.

THERE IS ANOTHER SHORE, YOU KNOW, UPON THE OTHER SIDE

by Joanna Russ

FANNY KEMBLE, THE DEAD ACtress, looked very much like the *Inglese* who came to the American Bar every night in Rome to mingle with the tourists. Meeting her was a little like falling asleep; you never saw her come in. The proprietor would lift his head and there she would be, listening to the English people, with her head cocked to one side and a dreamy smile on her face. It was always clear that she had been there for twenty or thirty minutes. She never stayed long with one group but would listen and nod and play with her fair hair, always in the same dress, winter or summer. Perhaps she had left her coat with the hatcheck girl, who was also English. One night the proprietor had asked her her name.

"Jane" she had answered, backing off a little and smiling. She had

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a trick of attending sideways to what people said. "You make your home here in Rome, Signorina Jane?" he had inquired politely in Italian but she had only continued to smile, curling a lock of hair between her fingers. He then said, in English, "Do you like Rome?" She nodded quickly.

"Oh yes," she said, "I've been to Keats' tomb—and the museums—and the places—"

"And the churches?" he urged, "The beautiful churches of Rome? Your stay, Signorina, would not be complete without a visit to some of our famous churches. To Saint Peter's. And if you are an inhabitant, how much worse—" but, looking aside at one of his waiters, he turned back to find that Signorina Jane was across the room by the telephone, talking to an American couple.

When Jane left the American Bar—and she usually left two hours or so after midnight, just before closing time—she did not at first go anywhere in particular. She would walk down one street or down another, she would tag the steps of stray travelers for a few minutes and then abandon them, she would pause at the edges of squares as if she were too timid to cross them alone, and often—very often—she would simply stand indecisively with her hands clasped behind her back. Parts of the city remained populated all night and it was to these that Jane seemed drawn after her initial puzzlement or confusion. She wandered through them, quickening her steps when she came to a crowd, and pushing through knots of people with eagerness and pleasure. Her face grew flushed and pretty. Near the Via Colombia there was a coffee shop that catered to students and stayed open all night; very late one summer night—or, properly speaking, very early one summer morning when the sky was still black as pitch—Jane pushed open the iron gate of the coffee shop and sat down at a table by herself.

"Snow White, where have you been all my life!" (Jane was pale as pale could be. She said nothing, only lifted her head with a vague smile, not understanding.)

"Snow White, what are you doing here!"

("She must live in a cellar," said someone behind a hand; a girl exclaimed, "Look at your dress!")

"What?" said Jane, becoming evasive at once as she always did when people spoke directly to her, half-trying to slide away and turning her face so that she could look at the speaker over her shoulder.

"Sua vesta," said the girl, louder, "Your dress. It's very pretty."

"Oh, I see."

"Listen, she's English," said the girl in Italian. "Giovanni, come look. She looks like Madame Recamier. She's incredible."

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"Well, she isn't lying on a sofa," said he, laughing.

"I'm going over. Come on."

They petted her and examined the material of her sleeves—which appeared to make her nervous—and then another couple came over and sat at the table which had been crowded enough with one.

"Com'e sympatica!"

"What lovely eyes she's got!"

"Signorina —"

Jane told her name. She said in her soft voice, "Signorina means 'Miss,' doesn't it?"

Giovanni nodded, propping his chin on his fists, beaming at her. "Yes, that means 'Miss.' "

"In England," said the other man, "To call somebody 'Miss" is an insult."

"That shows you what the English are like," said the first girl, positively.

"I beg your pardon," said Jane.

"That shows—" began the girl awkwardly in English; then she went off into Italian. They laughed until their chairs clattered on the floor.

"What did you say?" said Jane. Giovanni took her hands and began to explain.

"Coffee?" said the other girl, "Coffee for everyone."

"No, no, I don't want any," said Jane, "I have to go. *Non, grazie,"* struggling vainly to get up, pale and out of breath. Tears came to her eyes.

"What have you done to her? Look what you've done to her!" cried Giovanni's girl.

"I didn't do a thing," said he.

"Yes you did."

"I did not!"

"What time is it?" said someone.

"It's four. Let's watch the sun come up."

"No, let's not."

"Yes, let's. It's a holiday."

Then Jane said "Goodbye." She stood up, cold and abstracted.

"What?"

"What's the matter?"

"Let us walk you home," pleaded Giovanni, "Please. It's late." The table broke out in a babel of explanations, questions, contradictions. The waitress brought the coffee. Jane started to the door and Giovanni leapt after her and caught her arm.

"Please, Miss—" he said, "No, I'm sorry—I forgot—Jane?" Against the darkness of the open door which looked absolute from inside the shop but seemed to swim, to dissolve as they reached the street into a blue bath, the Englishwoman who looked like Juliette Recamier (the same high waist and full sleeves and the same pointed satin shoes) said laconically "It's too late." She added "I don't want it."

"Never again?" said Giovanni, looking next to her as he never did with his friends—dark, sensitive, "foreign."

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"No," said Jane, and she walked into the street.

"Go after her!" cried Giovanni's girl from inside the shop, "Go on, stupid!" but Giovanni did not move. "And why didn't you follow her?" said the girl crossly, coming up behind him, "I suppose she runs too fast."

"She's gone," said Giovanni and it was true; the street was empty.

"Oh, *wait* till I tell Sylvia! Just wait! And don't talk to me about going to see the sunrise because I don't want to. Not tonight." They linked arms and started back into the coffee shop. "She was absolutely unique. Unbelievable." The girl was yawning and swinging her free arm.

"Maybe," said Giovanni, "She will be back."

Jane never ate in company. She carried the drinks people gave her until she accidentally spilled them or they were taken away from her, she stirred tea or coffee but never touched it, and she crumbled pastries in her fingers. With peanuts and chocolate she made ornamental rows on the tops of tables. When Giovanni met her the next night in a bookstore off the Via Venezia he could not believe his good luck. The sun had set an hour before and Signorina Jane stood like a tall, night-blooming flower, reading an English book, a translation of the *Inferno*, the *Purgatorio*, the *Paradiso*.

"Do you like Dante, Jane?" said Giovanni quietly.

"Oh very much," she said, "I used to read him in school."

"Where did you go to school?" said Giovanni.

"In Derbyshire."

"Do you want me to buy you the book?"

"No, I don't read now," said Jane, and she put the book back on the shelf.

"I am still in school," said he. "I will get a master's degree in literature. Jane, do you want me to take you somewheres?"

"All right," she said. She followed him out on to the pavement.

"Do you live in Rome?" he asked.

"Yes, I do."

"Where?"

"At a hotel."

"Will you let me take you home tonight?"

"No."

"What is the matter?"

"Why, nothing's the matter," said Jane, surprised. "I don't want you to take me home, that's all."

"Do you have," said Giovanni, "A cold, correct English mama who doesn't approve of Italians?"

"I live by myself," said Jane, "Look, the light's changing," and she took him by the arm and pulled him across the street. She was looking into a store window at a mannequin wearing the latest ball gown *allo moda*. "Now that's what I should like," she said

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thoughtfully, "But it doesn't last, you know."

"We were very hurt last night," said Giovanni, a little exasperated.

"Hurt?" said Jane, stopping in her tracks.

"Yes, hurt," he repeated emphatically. He took her arm. "Signorina—I forget, you don't like that—well—Jane—Jane, don't run away from me." She moved closer to his side, her mouth a little open and her brow wrinkled. "Listen, can I take you to a circus? Would you like that?"

"Oh, *yes!*" She threw her arms around him, looking up into his face. "Yes, *please!*" Then she blushed and stepped away.

"I haven't been, you see," she added in an explanatory tone of voice, "Because I haven't got any money so I can only go to what's free."

"Then," said Giovanni, "You are a poor, lost girl in Rome and I think I should take you everywhere."

"I don't think you'd like that," said Jane in a subdued voice.

"Well, I'll see," said he, in good spirits. "Now to begin I'll buy you something."

"That lasts," said Jane quickly.

"Yes," said Giovanni, "it will last a lifetime."

"A lifetime!" said Jane scornfully, "That's nothing."

"How long have you decided to live?"

"Oh, I'm eighteen."

In a little store at the corner of the Via Venezia and the Via Cánale, Giovanni bought his new girl a ring made of silver and a polished granite pebble because that kind of thing was cheap but pretty.

"It's granite!" said Jane in dismay, recognizing it, "Oh, I don't want that."

"What's the matter?" said Giovanni.

"I want the pink thing," said Jane, pointing and leaning over the counter, "That one over there."

"But that's only quartz," said Giovanni, joking, "It won't last forever. Only a lifetime, perhaps."

"It goes with my dress," said Jane, stretching out her hand, and "Oh look," she said as the shopkeeper put it in her palm. When it was in its box and paid for she carried it carefully and tenderly, like an egg.

They walked for a while and, as they reached the approach to one of Rome's smaller bridges, "Jane," said Giovanni, "Will you meet me in the afternoon tomorrow?"

"I can't," she said.

"Please. I will be dining with my mother and sister."

"When will you take me to the circus?"

"Never," he said laughing, "Never, unless you see me tomorrow."

"I'll come at night."

"Ah, that's too late." She took

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her pink ring out of the box and turned it this way and that. In the dark it caught a sparkle from the streetlight.

"If I don't meet you, I'll meet you here," she said. "I'm very busy, you know."

"If you are busy at eighteen," he said, "How much busier you will be at thirty!"

Jane said nothing.

"We are at the *Palazzo Vecchione* at four," Giovanni said, "And you and I will go that night to the circus and we will even ride through here on our way."

But Jane was putting on her ring and said nothing.

"Now, Jane," said Giovanni, exasperated, "It's not polite not to look at me when I'm talking to you."

"Oh!" She looked up, so startled that he felt tender for her, this inexperienced foreign girl, alone at eighteen. He took her by the shoulders and kissed her, but it was an unsatisfactory, evasive sort of kiss and when he tried to repeat it she slipped away. She was repeating the name of the restaurant he had told her and smiling and waving.

"Now, Jane!" he said indignantly, "You are not saying goodbye to a train!"

"Goodbye, dear!" she cried, ever farther and farther away, "Goodbye!" and she walked rapidly over the bridge, still waving, until she disappeared into the darkness.

"Those crazy English," quoted Giovanni. Then he thought of her standing in the bookstore, rose-colored dress, rose-colored mouth, rose-colored heart. They would see her in the daylight, at least, where she couldn't slip away like that.

Maybe, he thought, his sister would be able to get to the bottom of it.

Jane did not appear the next day at the Palazzo Vecchione, but that evening when Giovanni drove over the bridge they had visited—there she was, standing at the farther end. He stopped the cab and opened the door for her to get in.

"Where were you?" he said.

"I didn't come," said Jane artlessly.

"But you *said* you would come!"

"Don't be angry with me, dear," said she, distressed, "Please don't. You see"—she was twisting her hands together in her lap — "I have a kind of illness—"

Giovanni took her hands, saying "Jane, *mia,* don't do that; it's ugly."

"I have a disease," she went on, "That doesn't allow me to go out in the sunlight. I have to stay inside all day. I lie down with a cloth over my eyes."

"My God, where's your ring!" said he.

"It wouldn't—" Jane said, "It wouldn't stay on my finger. I've sent it out to be fixed."

"Is that the truth?"

"I promise," she said. Then she

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laughed. "I didn't sell it," she said.

"I wouldn't put it past you," said Giovanni drily.

"No! Never!" She added drolly "Do you think I'm crazy, handsome *Italiano?*"

"Well!" he exclaimed, "Am I handsome?"

"Oh yes," said she, glancing at him sidewise, "Very."

At the circus Giovanni bought popcorn which Jane crumbled and dropped on the floor under her seat. She was excited about everything. She climbed on the seat in front of them and screamed "Make the tiger walk around!" at the tiger-and-lion-tamer. She even threw popcorn into the ring.

"I can't bloody well aim," she said, red-faced, "I'm bloody well out of practice."

"You might hit somebody on the head," said Giovanni.

"You'd mind that, wouldn't you?" said she, contemptuously, "Men are cowards. I suppose I'd dent his skull, wouldn't I? Fat chance!"

"I don't understand you," said Giovanni, laughing.

"If I *wanted* to dent anybody's skull," said Jane heatedly, standing up with her arms akimbo, "I jolly well would do it but I jolly well wouldn't use"—she exploded —"*Popcorn!*"

"Help, help," said Giovanni, covering his head with his hands.

Afterward they went backstage to see one of Giovanni's friends who had become a clown.

"I despaired of ever becoming a Doctor of Laws," said the clown, "And I had no money so now I have become—Signorina?"

"A doctor of mortality," said Jane, but with no air of having said a good thing. She was staring at his white, painted face and holding on to Giovanni's hand.

"You make me think that we're all going to die," she said. "I don't know why. Because your face is only paint, I suppose, and if you died tomorrow someone else could wear it."

"But I won't die tomorrow," said the clown, grinning. "I have no plans in that direction."

"You might all the same," said Jane.

"Then," said Giovanni's friend, wiping off his false-face with a towel, "I would die eternally grateful that at least I am not a Doctor of Laws. Giovanni, you have strange tastes but I like you. Would you care to join me for a drink?"

"Not tonight," said Giovanni. "I think I'll find a riverbank and sit on it and hear Jane talk about death."

"I don't know anything about that," said Jane off-handedly as they walked off, skirting a tangle of ropes. She added suddenly, "Do you know, I studied singing."

"No, really?" said Giovanni, delighted, *"Canta. Canta."*

"What?"

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"Sing for me."

So Jane sang and what she sang was this:

"What matters it how far we go"
his scaly friend replied, "There is
another shore, you know, upon the
other side.
The farther off from England,
the nearer is to France
So turn not pale, beloved snail,
but come and join the dance.
Will you
Won't you
Will you
Won't you
Won't you join the dance?
Will you
Won't you
Will you
Won't you
Won't you join the dance?"

"You have a very good voice," said Giovanni, "Do you know that? A really good voice."

"The less I use it the better it gets," said Jane. She twined her arm in his. "Oh my dear," she said, "I'm so old and it galls me."

"You're profound," he said, dazzled, "You're amazing. You're truly profound and beautiful."

"Take me home," she said, and then "No, don't."

"Why not?"

"No, that's all." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "Because I'm profound," she said, "And the reason I know I'm profound is that you told me so. She looked up at him like a pretty serpent.

"If you don't wear my ring tomorrow," he said, "I shall go to London and throw myself into the Thames."

"I was to London once," said Jane, yawning.

"Yes?"

"To see a doctor."

"And what did he tell you?"

"That I was going to die."

"What!"

"Of course. Nobody lives forever. What time is it?"

"It's past midnight, Cinderella," said Giovanni, stopping in the shadow of a doorway.

"How far past?" said she, languidly.

"Too far. You'll turn into a squash."

"That's what *you* think." She wound her arms around his neck. "I wonder what I'll do," she said.

"Madonna mia!" said Giovanni, "What's this?"

"Oh! Nothing. I'll never do anything."

"And why not?" demanded Giovanni.

"Because," she said, "Because." She leaned closer. "Do you know London slang?" she said. 'I'll teach you. Damned mortician's mark!"

"What's the matter?" said Giovanni.

"What time is it?"

"But—"

"What time is it?"

"It's almost three."

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"Oh." She sighed, leaning against his arm. "Take me home."

"Take you—"

"Take me home, my dear."

"Where do you live, you crazy English?"

"At the Rand," she said, "Where I share an apartment with my maiden grandmother."

In the lobby of the Rand Hotel they kissed goodnight. Giovanni walked out; on the street he could see Jane through a window, seated on a divan and curiously turning the pages of an American magazine. He did not see her get up fifteen minutes later, wave off-handedly to the night clerk (who waved back at the young lady who must —he thought—be a casual American) and walk out.

The next day Giovanni telephoned the Rand, got his connection, and recalled with a shock that he did not know Jane's last name. He had made no arrangements to meet her. He went to the bookstore on the Via Venezia, to the coffee shop (not yet open), to the bridge, but it hardly looked the same place in the daytime. He called his sister and asked if anyone had left a message for him, he instructed the switchboard operator at the Rand to give a note to a young English girl called Jane. He had visions of the operator's giving his note to a Jane of straw-colored braids and eleven years old. He sat on a bench with his head in his hands. At eight o'clock he had dinner at his home; at ten he went to the coffee shop.

Jane was sitting at a table by the door, wearing her pink dress.

"Where were *you?*" she said severely, pretending to look at him through imaginary binoculars. She glided to her feet and they slipped outside. Halfway down the street, in a doorway guarded by an iron grate, they suddenly embraced, kissing desperately, panting, half-smothered. Giovanni leaned against the grate, wiping his forehead.

"Dio!" he said expressively.

"You're so good," said Jane, "So sweet; so good to me." He was not surprised to see that she had begun to cry hysterically. "You don't know," she said, "You don't know."

"I know everything," he said, half-choked.

"Ass!" She shook her head. "What shall we do tonight?"

"Ah, Jane!" said Giovanni, reaching for her again. She stood beyond him, regarding him seriously while he tried to recover himself.

"I want to go to the American Bar," she said. She advanced a step and put out her hands. "Oh dear, oh dear," she said.

"Not again! Not here!" He turned and rested his forehead against the iron grating. "I'll take you anywheres," he said pleadingly, "But, *cara,* stay away from me in public, please."

"My goodness; you're sensitive."

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"I am mad as the wind and the water," said he.

Jane swept into the American Bar like a freakish gale; Giovanni could almost see the glasses blowing off the bar into her wake. She said hello to everyone, she talked incessantly while hanging on his arm, about a fish her father had caught that was so big—no, so big—no, *so* big, about her childhood, about an albino squirrel, about Giovanni, about newspapers, about the Russian language. She let a man persuade her to play billiards and she hiked her skirt up so as to put one foot on a chair.

"Damn it, Jane!" whispered Giovanni, "Don't let all these people see your knees!"

"Why, what's wrong with them?" she whispered back. She was smoking for the first time and puffing like a fiery furnace.

"They're *my* knees!"

"You can look at them like everybody else," said Jane wickedly.

They left the American Bar before midnight and went to an old hotel, all gilt and plush and plaster, where the furniture vomited dust and no one had cleaned the ceilings for fifty years. Jane stood against the heavy crimson curtains of their room, looking a little lost and a little sad.

"Will you love me forever, do you think?" she said in the most ordinary conversational tone imaginable.

"My God!" exclaimed Giovanni, "Look at you—long-waisted—long legs—like Diana!"

"No, of course you won't," mused Jane. "Of course not; you'll die some day; it's a pity."

"My dear—my darling—please—"

"But til then," said Jane, sighing, "Ah, til then—" She had insisted on leaving the curtains open, even though their room looked across a court to the other side of the hotel; Giovanni was trying to get to her without being seen through the windows.

"For God's sake," he said piteously, "Do you want to kill me?"

"No," Jane smiled, "Wait," and with an extraordinarily graceful gesture she wrapped herself in the hangings. Leaning across the window like a kind of Roman sprite or sylph, she turned out the lights.

But the uncurtained windows bothered him and about an hour later he stole out of bed and drew the hangings, his instinct for privacy satisfied at last. Later, in his sleep, he heard Jane talking to herself and he woke to find her sitting on the bed with her shoes in her hand and her dress open down the back.

"*Dove va?*" he said sleepily.

"Ssssh." She patted his head.

"*Cara,* where are you going?"

"Home, love."

"But it's early," he complained, "It's dark out."

"Yes, yes," she whispered hurriedly, slipping on her shoes. There

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was a vague light in the air, filtering under the curtains. "I know, love. But I can't be too careful. I've slept like the dead. For hours. Fasten my dress, won't you?" He fumbled with it. "Oh, hurry!" She pulled away from him and did it herself. It seemed to him in his stupor that her fingers merely flashed over the buttons without touching them. He sank back into the bed. "It's dark," he muttered resentfully, "Go and see," and when he heard her steps, mixed with his dreams, cross the room, he fell back into sleep. There was a moment's silence; then he heard a gasp—Jane had touched the curtains. She flung them back and in an instant the room was light. It was almost day. Roman sparrows racketed on the cobbles below and a man in the courtyard—a milkman or a cook—raised his arm to her in a friendly greeting.

"Damn you, damn you, damn you!" she shouted. Her face was suffused with blood. She pounced on her lover, shaking him.

"Cara—" he stumbled to his feet, *"Cara, cara,* what is it?"

"Look!" she shrieked, sobbing, "Look! Look!" and she hauled the naked man to the window. Then Jane stepped back and smashed her fist through the window; glass shattered and fell; she thrust her other hand through; she sawed both wrists on the edges.

"Don't!" cried Giovanni.

"Don't! My God! You'll hurt yourself—" and he grasped both her hands, both white as lilies and both unmarked.

"You ass" she hissed slowly, "You bloody ass! I can't hurt myself; *don't you understand?"*

"No, I don't understand," said he, trembling, "I don't understand. I love you." Sunlight touched the tops of the buildings across the court and Jane fell silent, watching it with fascinated attention. She turned slowly and quietly in his arms; her hands dropped and she smiled vaguely, as if deaf. Sunlight touched the stone carvings over the window, flooded through the smashed glass, and dropped a slanted shadow across the sill.

"Oh, my dear," Jane said, "It's all gone," and Giovanni tightened his arms around her.

He was holding dust; it slid through his hands, hung for a moment sparkling in the sunlight, and fell lightly to the floor.

In his attempts to trace her steps through Rome, Giovanni spoke to the proprietor of the American Bar and the next day visited Rome's English Cemetery where lie so many illustrious and consumptive dead. But when the twilight fell, no beautiful, mad *Inglese* glided sepulchrally from behind the stones or rose like a fog out of the ground. Only—near the gates where the light shone in from the street—he found a block of granite, half lost in weeds. It said:

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SACRED TO THE
MEMORY OF JANE HODD
born October 17, 1803,
Oaks, Derbyshire died May
30, 1821, Rome, of con-
sumption
The journey that was to have saved her proved her death. Far from home and friends she lies, never having tasted the fullness of life. May God in His infinite mercy receive her and give her peace.

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: LXV

When the Super-Viking, Poul Mohandasson, established the Indo-Danish Imperium in 5107, he at once made Ferdinand Feghoot his Grand Helmsman. Then, from his Throne—which showed the wedding of Wotan and Devi in the frankest possible detail—he ordered all nations to sign an agreement never to take part in wars of the Galaxy.

"Ho-ho!" he boomed. "So I cover up my space-raiding! See to it! A tremendous occasion—all aliens must be deceived!"

Feghoot set about organizing the affair. Treasuries were looted to pay for luxuriant new gardens on the Malabar Coast. Earth's fairest maidens were summoned, famous scientists, saddhus and swamis, the Heads of State and diplomats of all known worlds. Newsmen and telecasters arrived by the thousands. Then the gardens were ringed by hard-bitten troops, splendidly uniformed, with secret instructions.

Finally the great day arrived. The Super-Viking himself entered, wearing his horned Turban of State. He took one look, leaped from his howdah, and bellowed, "Ferdinand Grendelson, what have you done? *They've all been stripped naked!*"

He seized his huge drinking horn, took a comforting draught—and spat it out instantly. "ORANGE PEKOE!" he roared.

"Everyone's drinking it, Most Rapacious High Admiral," said Ferdinand Feghoot. "It'll be a sensation. For the first time in history, the whole world will sign a nude rally tea pact."

—GRENDEL BRIARTON (*with thanks to E. Nelson Bridwell*)

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GLORY ROAD

by Robert A. Heinlein

(Conclusion)

SYNOPSIS: My name's Oscar Gordon and I'm a soldier by trade. Both the name and the trade were forced on me. This is a pretty loused-up world, in my opinion, and I know of a better one.

I was taking it easy at a French nudist resort, L'Ile du Levant, when I met this incredible babe, the most beautiful woman I have ever seen or hope to see—

You see, I had just been paid off by the Army, having been drafted into it by a mistake—mine. I had been beating the draft as a semi-pro athlete in college when suddenly football was de-emphasized and I lost a pension as "a dependent of deceased veteran" by turning twenty-one. Broke, I notified my draft board, intending to buck for the Air Force Academy.

So I wound up as a private in Southeast Asia. After much too long a time I was wounded badly enough to be sent home for discharge, at Wiesbaden, because my stepfather and my mother were there. On the way, by military transport via Suez, I bought an Irish Sweepstake's ticket, then won several more of them at poker. But when I got to Germany my family had been sent to Alaska. So I was killing a little time as a civilian while waiting to see if a lucky fluke would win me enough Sweepstake's money to let me stay and go to school in Europe.

That's when I met this Helen of Troy beauty!

I am so dazzled by her that I don't even ask her her name—but she quizzed me a lot. Then she swam away and I lost her.

The next day I searched the island for her—no luck. But the Paris edition of the *New York Herald Tribune* listed one of my tickets as having drawn a horse—thousands of dollars if I grab it at once. So I must go to Nice to take care of it, much as I want to stay and look for her.

My Sweepstake's ticket turns out to be counterfeit.

I was about to go back to L'Ile du Levant when my attention was forced on a personal ad: "ARE YOU A COWARD? We badly need a brave man—high pay, glorious adventure, great danger—" with an exact description of *me* (save for the minor point that I was born with an exact sense of direction). So some idiot is playing games!—so I go to the address in the ad to see what the joke is.

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There I met a little, old, pink gnome of a man who turned me over to a "doctor"—who turned out to be my Helen-of-Troy girl.

She gave me a physical examination, changed my name to "Oscar" and let me call her "Star"—and hypnotised me and took me . . . somewhere.

I don't care where, it is a wonderful world—beautiful, uncrowded, no taxicabs. I've got a job as her "champion," complete with sword and bow, and the old gnome, Rufo, is my groom. They can take their traffic lights and withholding taxes and stuff it!

My first job is to kill an unkillable giant ogre, Igli. This I did by feeding him to himself, feet first, until he was gone. After that we descended a great cliff into the valley of Nevia, fought our way through the Horned Ghosts and the Coldwater Gang, lost all of our baggage and most of our weapons in a swamp, and at last reached the country manor of the local squire, Milord Doral 't Giuk Dorali. Old Jocko was so impressed by my wondrous exploits that he offered me "Table, and Roof, and Bed." I accepted, not quite sure what he meant.

After a magnificent drunken feast Mrs. Jocko and two of her daughters escorted me to bed—and were about to climb in with me. With as much drunken courtesy as I could manage, I told 'em, "No, thanks."

The next morning we left there in a great hurry with Star in a terrible rage. I had a bad hangover and no breakfast. Since Star wasn't speaking, I told Rufo about "The Three Bares" who tried to climb into my bed. Instead of laughing he was terrified—and galloped away to tell Star.

When Star learned what had happened, her anger up to that time was mere pique; she started in to give me the worst tongue lashing I have ever had. But I chopped her off short and blasted her ears back.

We then all turned back to return to the House of the Doral.

Rufo was extremely frightened and told me why. I had scorned the Doral's hospitality after having formally accepted it—so the Doral, old Jocko, is now honorbound to kill all of us.

Star explained this in more detail—and in the course of it we each admitted our love for the other. I agreed to try to repair the wrong I had done the Doral. Star thought that it was just barely possible, if she could get in a word or two first, that she might be able to persuade him to spare our lives.

I kissed her and then, swords sheathed and bows unstrung, we rode proudly into the target area.

Three days later we rode out again—the pride of house Doral restored, our weapons and baggage renewed by the graciousness of Milord Doral (old Jock never does things by halves!)—and Your 'umble Svt., the Hero Oscar, very much debilitated. Three days of "Table and Roof and Bed" had damn near killed me!

As we rode Star explained to me some of the dangers we yet faced and why this world was so different. The planet Nevia is on is not merely around some other star; it is in a different universe, and it has not

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only its own customs (such as the gentle one that tripped me and nearly got us killed) but also its own natural laws. This universe was much like the one I grew up in; the differences are very minor—it has no firearms, no explosives, no H-bombs—but mostly it is like home. But some universes are so extremely different that human beings cannot live in them at all, utterly deadly.

We are headed for one of those deadly universes—

—to steal the Egg of the Phoenix, out of the Great Black Tower, where it is guarded by the Never-Born, the Eater of Souls—

—if we manage to stay alive through this day . . . which she thinks is extremely unlikely.

I thought over this preposterous story, and realized that Star was dead serious. She meant exactly what she said: We were not likely even to live through that day, much less win to the Black Tower in another universe, there to fight the Eater of Souls, whatever sort of an insect *that* was. "Star, will you marry me?"

The darling almost fainted. Then she offered, with utter humbleness, to let me have her at once, on the grass by the road, without benefit of clergy. This I refused. We compromised by marrying each other with an ancient and simple ceremony: We "jumped over the sword" while pledging our mutual vows.

Naturally this left me feeling so good that it was just a mild workout for a professional Hero (me) to fight his way through a woods infested with giant rats and murderous wild swine. But my groom Rufo was wounded so badly that we have to fly to our next trouble, the Forest of the Dragons—no trouble to Star; her witchcraft includes a "magic carpet" routine. But it makes Rufo seasick.

These are not real dragons—they are worse—giant dinosaurs who "breathe flame" by belching and lighting off their own homemade sewer gas. They also have long sharp teeth and would love to eat us.

I had to kill a small one, about the size of a box car.

In a cave in the forest Star takes us through a "Gate" which leads into the deadly world of the Black Tower, the Eater of Souls, and the Egg of the Phoenix. *Spung!*—we came out the other side and into more trouble than seems possible. Artificial androids, a whole swarm of them, and all of them trying to kill us—so we had to kill all of them, fast, to stay alive. After that, Star flew us again, to the top of the Black Tower. With rope and a little magic we let ourselves down inside. Star had taught me a map of its maze interior and now we were dependent on my unusually strong sense of direction, as the interior of the tower is boobytrapped with illusions of many sorts—twists that really were not there, passageways that do not exist, wild changes in the direction of gravity. Both Star and I have been wounded in fighting the androids. I can't use a bow, her right arm is useless. I led, sword in hand; behind me was Star armed with a Buck-Rogers hand gun captured from the androids; bringing up the rear was Rufo, bow ready.

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I managed to keep us straight, still headed for the Egg of the Phoenix, in spite of false twists and turns. In time the passageway became very narrow, very low, very rocky. At last we were inching along on our bellies in total darkness.

I began to smell rats. Presently I could hear them—and *feel* them as they ran past us in the darkness. I have an utter horror of rats, dating back to my early childhood, a time when my mother and I were flat broke and living in a slum. Twice in the night rats ran over my face—I still wake up screaming.

I saw something ahead in the tunnel—the eyes of a giant rat, big as a coyote. I had no room to move, to use weapons. If he got past my point, he would be at my face.

I then did the only really brave thing I have ever done in my life: I told Star and Rufo to wait—and I inched forward.

I could smell the damned thing now and see its outlines. I gulped sour vomit and went ahead. His eyes seemed to drop a little as if he were crouching to charge.

BUT NO RUSH CAME. THE lights got more definite and wider apart, and when I had squeezed a foot or two farther I realized with shaking relief that they were not rat's eyes but something else—anything, I didn't care what.

I continued to inch forward. Not only was the Egg in that direction but I still didn't know what it was and I had best see before telling Star to move up.

The "eyes" were twin pinholes in a tapestry that covered the end of that rat hole. I could see its embroidered texture and I found I could look through one of its imperfections when I got up to it.

There was a large room beyond, the floor a couple of feet lower than where I was. At the far end, fifty feet away, a man was standing by a bench, reading a book. Even as I watched he raised his eyes and glanced my way. He seemed to hesitate.

I didn't. The hole had eased enough so that I managed one foot under and lunged forward, brushing the arras aside with my sword. I stumbled and bounced to my feet, on guard.

He was at least as fast. He had slapped the book down on the bench and drawn sword himself, advanced toward me, while I was popping out of that hole. He stopped, knees bent, wrist straight, left arm back, and point for me, perfect as a fencing master, and looked me over, not yet engaged by three or four feet between our steels.

I did not rush him. There is a go-for-broke tactic, "the target," taught by the best swordmasters, which consists in headlong advance with arm, wrist, and blade

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in full extension—all attack and no attempt to parry. But it works only by perfect timing when you see your opponent slacken up momentarily. Otherwise it is suicide.

This time it would have been suicide; he was as ready as tomcat with his back up. So I sized him up while he looked me over. He was a smallish neat man with arms long for his height—I might or might not have reach on him, especially as his rapier was an old style, longer than Lady Vivamus (but slower thereby, unless he had a much stronger wrist)—and he was dressed more for the Paris of Richelieu than for Karth-Hokesh. No, that's not fair; the great black Tower had no styles, else I would have been as out of style in my fake Robin Hood get-up. The Iglis we had killed had worn no clothes.

He was an ugly cocky little man with a merry grin and the biggest nose west of Durante—made me think of my first sergeant's nose, very sensitive he was about being called "Schnozzola." But the resemblance stopped there; my first sergeant never smiled and had mean, piggish eyes; this man's eyes were merry and proud.

"Are you Christian?" he demanded.

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing. Blood's blood, either way. If Christian you be, confess. If pagan, call your false gods. I'll allow you no more than three stanzas. But I'm sentimental, I like to know what I'm killing."

"I'm American."

"Is that a county? Or a disease? And what are you doing in Hoax?"

" 'Hoax'? Hokesh?"

He shrugged only with his eyes, his point never moved. "Hoax, Hokesh—a matter of geography and accent; this chateau was once in the Carpathians, so 'Hokesh' it is, if 'twill make your death merrier. Come now, let us sing."

He advanced so fast and smoothly that he seemed to apport and our blades rang as I parried his attack in sixte and riposted, was countered—remise, reprise, beat-and-attack—the phrase ran so smoothly, so long, and in such variation that a spectator might have thought that we were running through Grand Salute.

But *I* knew! That first lunge was meant to kill me, and so was his every move throughout the phrase. At the same time he was feeling me out, trying my wrist, looking for weaknesses, whether I was afraid of low line and always returned to high or perhaps was a sucker for a disarm. I never lunged, never had a chance to; every part of the phrase was forced on me, I simply replied, tried to stay alive.

I knew in three seconds that I was up against a better swordsman than myself, with a wrist like

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steel yet supple as a striking snake. He was the only swordsman I have ever met who used prime and octave—*used* them, I mean, as readily as sixte and carte. Everyone learns them and my own master made me practice them as much as the other six—but most fencers don't *use* them; they simply may be forced into them, awkwardly and just before losing a point.

I would lose, not a point, but my life—and I knew, long before the end of that first long phrase, that my life was what I was about to lose, by all odds.

Yet at first clash the idiot began to sing!

"Lunge and counter and thrust,
"Sing me the logic of steel!
"Tell me, sir, how do you feel?
"Riposte and remise if you must
"In logic long known to be just.

"Shall we argue, rebut and refute
"In enthymeme clear as your eye?
"Tell me, sir, why do you sigh?
"Tu es fatigué, sans doute?
"Then sleep while I'm counting the loot."

The above was long enough for at least thirty almost-successful attempts on my life, and on the last word he disengaged as smoothly and unexpectedly as he had engaged.

"Come, come, lad!" he said. "Pick it up! Would let me sing alone? Would die as a clown with ladies watching? Sing!—and say goodbye gracefully, with your last rhyme racing your death rattle." He banged his right boot in a flamenco stomp. "Try! The price is the same either way."

I didn't drop my eyes at the sound of his boot; it's an old gambit, some fencers stomp on every advance, every feint, on the chance that the noise will startle opponent out of timing, or into rocking back, and thus gain a point. I had last fallen for it before I could shave.

But his words gave me an idea. His lunges were short—full extension is fancy play for foils, too dangerous for real work. But I had been retreating, solely, with the wall behind me. Shortly, when he re-engaged, I would either be a butterfly pinned to that wall, or stumble over something unseen, go arsy-versy, then spiked like wastepaper in the park. I didn't dare leave that wall behind me.

Worst, Star would be coming out of that rat hole behind me any moment now and might be killed as she emerged even if I managed to kill him at the same time. But if I could turn him around—My beloved was a practical woman; no "sportsmanship" would keep her steel stinger out of his back.

But the happy counter-thought

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was that if I went along with his madness, tried to rhyme and sing, he might play me along, amused to hear what I could do, before he killed me.

But I couldn't afford to stretch it out. Unfelt, he had pinked me in the forearm. Just a bloody scratch that Star could make good as new in minutes—but it would weaken my wrist before long and it disvantaged me for low line: Blood makes a slippery grip.

"First stanza," I announced, advancing and barely engaging, foible-à-foible. He respected it, not attacking, playing with the end of my blade, tiny counters and feather-touch parries.

That was what I wanted. I started circling right as I began to recite—and he let me:

"Tweedledum and Tweedledee
"Agreed to rustle cattle.
"Said Tweedledum to Tweedle-dee
"I'll use my nice new saddle."

"Come, come, my old!" he said chidingly. "No stealing. Honor among beeves, always. And rhyme and scansion limp. Let your Carroll fall trippingly off the tongue."

"I'll try," I agreed, still moving right. "Second stanza—

"I sing of two lasses in Birmingham,
"Shall we weep at the scandal concerning them?"—

—and I rushed him.

It didn't quite work. He had, as I hoped, relaxed the tiniest bit, evidently expecting that I would go on with mock play, tips of blades alone, while I was reciting.

It caught him barely off guard but he failed to fall back, parrying strongly instead and suddenly we were in an untenable position, corps-à-corps, forte-à-forte, almost tete-à-tete.

He laughed in my face and sprang back as I did, landing us back en garde. But I added something. We had been fencing point only. The point is mightier than the edge but my weapon had both and a man used to the point is sometimes a sucker for a cut. As we separated I flipped my blade at his head.

I meant to split it open. No time for that, no force behind it, but it sliced his right forehead almost to eyebrow.

"*Touché!*" he shouted. "Well struck. And well sung. Let's have the rest of it."

"All right," I agreed, fencing cautiously and waiting for blood to run into his eyes. A scalp wound is the bloodiest of flesh wounds and I had great hopes for this one. And swordplay is an odd thing; you don't really use your mind, it is much too fast for that. Your wrist thinks and tells your feet and body what to do, bypassing your brain—any thinking *you* do is for later, stored in-

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structions, like a programmed computer.

I went on:

"They're now in the dock
"For lifting the—"

I got him in the forearm, the way he got me, but worse. I thought I had him and pressed home. But he did something I had heard of, never seen: He retreated very fast, flipped his blade and changed hands.

No help to me—A right-handed fencer hates to take on a southpaw; it throws everything out of balance, whereas a southpaw is used to the foibles of the right-handed majority—and this son of a witch was just as strong, just as skilled, with his left hand. Worse, he now had toward me the eye undimmed by blood.

He pinked me again, in the knee cap, hurting like fire and slowing me. Despite *his* wounds, much worse than mine, I knew I couldn't go on much longer. We settled down to grim work.

There is a riposte in seconde, desperately dangerous but brilliant—if you bring it off. It had won me several matches in épée with nothing at stake but a score. It starts from sixte; first your opponent counters. Instead of parrying to carte, you press and bind, sliding all the way down and around his blade and corkscrewing in till your point finds flesh. Or you can beat, counter, and bind, starting from sixte, thus setting it off yourself.

Its shortcoming is that, unless it is done perfectly, it is too late for parry and riposte; you run your own chest against his point.

I didn't try to initiate it, not against *this* swordsman; I just thought about it.

We continued to fence, perfectly each of us. Then he stepped back slightly while countering and barely skidded in his own blood.

My wrist took charge; I corkscrewed in with a perfect bind to seconde—and my blade went through his body.

He looked surprised, brought his bell up in salute, and crumpled at the knees as the grip fell from his hand. I had to move forward with my blade as he fell, then started to pull it out of him.

He grasped it. "No, no, my friend, please leave it there. It corks the wine, for a time. Your logic is sharp and touches my heart. Your name, sir?"

"Oscar of Gordon."

"A good name. One should never be killed by a stranger. Tell me, Oscar of Gordon, have you seen Carcassonne?"

"No."

"See it. Love a lass, kill a man, write a boo, fly to the Moon—I have done all these." He gasped and foam came out of his mouth, pink. "I've even had a house fall

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on me. What devastating wit! What price honor when timber taps thy top? 'Top?' tap? taupe, tape—tonsor!—when timber taps thy tonsor. You shaved mine."

He choked and went on: "It grows dark. Let us exchange gifts and part friends, if you will. My gift first, in two parts: Item: You are lucky, you shall not die in bed."

"I guess not."

"Please. Item: Friar Guillaume's razor ne'er shaved the barber, it is much too dull. And now your gift, my old—and be quick, I need it. But first—how did that limerick end?"

I told him. He said, very weakly, almost in rattle, "Very good. Keep trying. Now grant me your gift, I am more than ready." He tried to Sign himself.

So I granted him grace, stood wearily up, went to the bench and collapsed on it, then cleaned both blades, first wiping the little Solingen, then most carefully grooming the Lady Vivamus. I managed to stand and salute him with a clean sword. It had been an honor to know him.

I was sorry I hadn't asked him his name. He seemed to think I knew it.

I sat heavily down and looked at the arras covering the rat hole at the end of the room and wondered why Star and Rufo hadn't come out? All that clashing steel and talk—

I thought about walking over and shouting for them. But I was too weary to move just yet. I sighed and closed my eyes—

Through sheer boyish high spirits (and carelessness I had been chided for, time and again) I had broken a dozen eggs. My mother looked down at the mess and I could see that she was about to cry. So I clouded up too. She stopped her tears, took me gently by the shoulder, and said, "It's all right, son. Eggs aren't that important." But I was ashamed, so I twisted away and ran.

Down hill I ran, heedless and almost flying—then was shockingly aware that I was at the wheel and the car was out of control. I groped for the brake pedal, couldn't find it and felt panic . . . then did find it—and felt it sink with that mushiness that means you've lost brake fluid pressure. Something ahead in the road and I couldn't *see*. Couldn't even turn my head and my eyes were clouded with something running down into them. I twisted the wheel and nothing happened—radius rod gone.

Screams in my ear as we hit!—and I woke up in bed with a jerk and the screams were my own. I was going to be late to school, disgrace not to be borne. Never born, agony shameful, for the schoolyard was empty; the other kids, scrubbed and virtuous, were

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in their seats and I couldn't find my classroom. Hadn't even had time to go to the bathroom and here I was at my desk with my pants down about to do what I had been too hurried to do before I left home and all the other kids had their hands up but teacher was calling on *me*. I *couldn't* stand up to recite; my pants were not only down I didn't have any on at all if I stood up they would see it the boys would laugh at me the girls would giggle and look away and tilt their noses. But the unbearable disgrace was that *I didn't know the answer!*

"Come, come!" my teacher said sharply. "Don't waste the class's time, E.C. You Haven't Studied Your Lesson."

Well, no, I hadn't. Yes, I had, but she had written "Problems 1-6" on the blackboard and I had taken that as "1 *and* 6"—and this was number four. But *She* would never believe me; the excuse was too thin. We pay off on touchdowns, not excuses.

"That's how it is, Easy," my Coach went on, his voice more in sorrow than in anger. "Yardage is all very well but you don't make a nickel unless you cross that old goal line with the egg tucked underneath your arm." He pointed at the football on his desk. "There it is. I had it gilded and lettered clear back at the beginning of the season, you looked so good and I had so much confidence in you—it was meant to be yours at the end of the season, at a victory banquet." His brow wrinkled and he spoke as if trying to be fair. "I won't say you could have saved things all by yourself. But you do take things too easy, Easy—maybe you need another name. When the road gets rough, you could try harder." He sighed. "My fault, I should have cracked down. Instead, I tried to be a father to you. But I want you to know you aren't the only one who loses by this—at my age it's not easy to find a new job."

I pulled the covers up over my head; I couldn't stand to look at him. But they wouldn't let me alone; somebody started shaking my shoulder. "Gordon!"

"le'me 'lone!"

"Wake up, Gordon, and get your ass inside. You're in trouble."

I certainly was, I could tell that as soon as I stepped into the office. There was a sour taste of vomit in my mouth and I felt awful—as if a herd of water buffaloes had walked over me, stepping on me here and there. Dirty ones.

The First Sergeant didn't look at me when I came in; he let me stand and sweat first. When he did look up, he examined me up and down before speaking.

Then he spoke slowly, letting me taste each word. "Absent Over Leave, terrorizing and insulting native women, unauthorized use of government property . . .

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scandalous conduct . . . insubordinate and obscene language . . . resisting arrest . . . striking an M.P.—Gordon, why didn't you steal a horse? We hang horse thieves in these parts. It would make it all so much simpler."

He smiled at his own wit. The old bastard always had thought he was a wit. He was half right.

But I didn't give a damn what he said. I realized dully that it had all been a dream, just another of those dreams I had had too often lately, wanting to get out of this aching jungle. Even *She* hadn't been real. My—what was her name?—even her name I had made up. Star. My Lucky Star—Oh, Star, my darling, you *aren't!*

He went on: "I see you took off your chevrons. Well, that saves time but that's the only thing good about it. Out of uniform. No shave. And your clothes are filthy! Gordon, you are a disgrace to the Army of the United States. You know that, don't you? And you can't sing your way out of this one. No. I.D. on you, no pass, using a name not your own. Well, Evelyn Cyril my fine lad, we'll use your right name now. Officially."

He swung around in his swivel chair—he hadn't had his fat ass out of it since they sent him to Asia, no patrols for him. "Just one thing I'm curious about. Where did you get *that?* And whatever possessed you to try to steal it?" He nodded at a file case.

I recognized what was sitting on it, even though it had been painted with gold gilt the last time I recalled seeing it whereas now it was covered with the special black gluey mud they grow in Southeast Asia. I started toward it. "That's mine!"

"No, no!" he said sharply. "Burny, burny, boy." He moved the football farther back. "Stealing it doesn't make it yours. I've taken charge of it as evidence. For your information, you phony hero, the docs think he's going to die."

"Who?"

"Why should you care who? Two bits to a Bangkok tickul you didn't know his name when you clobbered him. You can't go around clobbering natives just because you're feeling brisk—they've got rights, maybe you hadn't heard. You're supposed to clobber them only when and where you are told to."

Suddenly he smiled. It didn't improve him. With his long, sharp nose and his little bloodshot eyes I suddenly realized how much he looked like a rat.

But he went on smiling and said, "Evelyn my boy, maybe you took off those chevrons too soon."

"Huh?"

"Yes. There may be a way out of this mess. Sit down." He repeated sharply, "'Sit down,' I said. If I had my way, we'd simply Section-Eight you and forget you—anything to get rid of you. But

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the Company Commander has other ideas—a really brilliant idea that could close your whole file. There's a raid planned for tonight. So—" He leaned over, got a bottle of Four Roses and two cups out of his desk, poured two drinks. "—have a drink."

Everybody knew about that bottle—everybody but the Company Commander, maybe. But the top sergeant had never been known to offer anyone a drink—save one time when he had followed it by telling his victim that he was being recommended for a general court martial.

"No, thanks."

"Come on, take it. Hair of the dog. You're going to need it. Then go take a shower and get yourself looking decent even if you aren't, before you see the Company Commander."

I stood up. I wanted that drink, I needed it. I would have settled for the worst rotgut—and Four Roses is pretty smooth—but I would have settled for the firewater old—what was his name?—had used to burst my eardrums.

But I didn't want to drink with him. I should not drink anything at all here. Nor eat any—

I spat in his face.

He looked utterly shocked and started to melt. I drew my sword and had at him.

It got dark but I kept on laying about me, sometimes connecting, sometimes not.

XVI

SOMEONE WAS SHAKING MY shoulder. "Wake up!"

"Le'me 'lone!"

"You've got to wake up. Boss, please wake up."

"Yes, my Hero—*please!*"

I opened my eyes, smiled at her, then tried to look around. Kee-*ripes!* what a shambles! In the middle of it, close to me, was a black glass pillar, thick and about five feet high. On top was the Egg. "Is that it?"

"Yep!" agreed Rufo. "That's it!" He looked battered but gay.

"Yes, my Hero champion," Star confirmed, "that is the true Egg of the Phoenix. I have tested."

"Uh—" I looked around. "Then where's old Soul-Eater?"

"You killed it. Before we got here. You still had sword in hand and the Egg tucked tightly under your left arm. We had much trouble getting them loose so that I could work on you."

I looked down my front, saw what she meant, and looked away. Red just isn't my color. To take my mind off surgery I said to Rufo, "What took you so long?"

Star answered, "I thought we would never find you!"

"How did you find me?"

Rufo said, "Boss, we couldn't exactly lose you. We simply followed your trail of blood—even when it dead-ended into blank walls. *She* is stubborn."

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"Uh . . . see any dead men?"

"Three or four. Strangers, no business of ours. Constructs, most likely. We didn't dally." He added, "And we won't dally getting out, either, once you're patched up enough to walk. Time is short."

I flexed my right knee, cautiously. It still hurt where I had been pinked on the knee cap, but what Star had done was taking the soreness out. "My legs are all right. I'll be able to walk as soon as Star is through. But—" I frowned. "—I don't relish going through that rat tunnel again. Rats give me the willies."

"What rats, Boss? In which tunnel?"

So I told him.

Star made no comment, just went on plastering me and sticking on dressings. Rufo said, "Boss, you did get down on your knees and crawl—in a passage just like all the others. I couldn't see any sense to it but you had proved that you knew what you were doing, so we didn't argue, we did it. When you told us to wait while you scouted, we did that, too—until we had waited a long time and *She* decided that we had better try to find you."

I let it drop.

We left almost at once, going out the "front" way and had no trouble, no illusions, no traps, nothing but the fact that the "true path" was long and tedious. Rufo and I stayed alert, same formation, with Star in the middle carrying the Egg.

Neither Star nor Rufo knew whether we were still likely to be attacked, nor could we have held off anything stronger than a Cub Scout pack. Only Rufo could bend a bow and I could no longer wield a sword. However, the single necessity was to give Star time to destroy the Egg rather than let it be captured. "But that's nothing to worry about," Rufo assured me. "About like being at ground-zero with an A-weapon. You'll never notice it."

Once we were outside it was a longish hike to the Grotto Hills and the other Gate. We lunched as we hiked—I was terribly hungry—and shared Rufo's brandy and Star's water without too much water. I felt pretty good by the time we reached the cave of this Gate; I didn't even mind sky that wasn't sky but some sort of roof, nor the odd shifts in gravitation.

A diagram or "pentacle" was already in this cave. Star had only to freshen it, then we waited a bit—that had been the rush, to get there before that "Gate" could be opened; it wouldn't be available for weeks or perhaps months thereafter—much too long for any human to live in Karth-Hokesh.

We were in position a few minutes early. I was dressed like the Warlord of Mars—just me and sword belt and sword. We all lightened ship to the limit as Star

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was tired and pulling live things through would be strain enough. Star wanted to save my pet longbow but I vetoed it. She did insist that I keep the Lady Vivamus and I didn't argue very hard; I didn't want ever to be separated from my sword again. She touched it and told me that it was *not* dead metal, but now part of me.

Rufo wore only his unpretty pink skin, plus dressings; his attitude was that a sword was a sword and he had better ones at home. Star was, for professional reasons, wearing no more.

"How long?" asked Rufo, as we joined hands.

"Count down is minus two minutes," she answered. The clock in Star's head is as accurate as my bump of direction. She never used a watch.

"You've told him?" said Rufo.

"No."

Rufo said, "Haven't you any shame? Don't you think you've conned him long enough?" He spoke with surprising roughness and I was about to tell him that he must not speak to her that way. But Star cut him off.

"QUIET!"

She began to chant. Then—"*Now!*"

Suddenly it was a different cave. "Where are we?" I asked.

"On Nevia's planet," Rufo answered. "Other side of the Eternal Peaks—and I've got a good mind to get off and see Jocko."

"Do it," Star said angrily. "You talk too much."

"Only if my pal Oscar comes along. Want to, old comrade? I can get us there, take about a week. No dragons. They'll be glad to see you—especially Muri."

"You leave Muri out of this!" Star was actually shrill.

"Can't take it, huh?" he said sourly. "Younger woman and all that."

"You know that's not it!"

"Oh, how very much it is!" he retorted. "And how long do you think you can get away with it? It's not fair, it never was fair. It—"

"Silence! Count down right now!" We joined hands again and whambo! we were in another place. This was still another cave with one side partly open to the outdoors; the air was very thin and bitterly cold and snow had sifted in. The diagram was set into rock in raw gold. "Where is this?" I wanted to know.

"On your planet," Star answered. "A place called Tibet."

"And you could change trains here," Rufo added, "if *She* weren't so stubborn. Or you could walk out—although it's a long, tough walk; I did it once."

I wasn't tempted. The last I had heard, Tibet was in the hands of unfriendly peace-lovers. "Will we be here long?" I asked. "This place needs central heating." I wanted to hear anything but more

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argument. Star was my beloved and I couldn't stand by and hear anyone be rude to her—but Rufo was my blood brother by much lost blood; I owed my life to him several times over.

"Not long," answered Star. She looked drawn and tired.

"But time enough to get this straightened out," added Rufo, "so that you can make up your own mind and not be carried around like a cat in a sack. *She* should have told you long since. *She*—"

"Positions!" snapped Star. "Count down coming up. Rufo, if you don't shut up, I'll leave you here and let you walk out again—in deep snow barefooted to your chin."

"Go ahead," he said. "Threats make me as stubborn as you are. Which isn't surprising. Oscar, *She* is—"

"SILENCE!"

"—Empress of the Twenty Universes—"

XVII

WE WERE IN A LARGE OCTAGONAL room, with lavishly beautiful silvery walls.

"—and my grandmother," Rufo finished.

"Not 'Empress,'" Star protested. "That's a silly word for it."

"Near enough."

"And as for the other, that's my misfortune, not my fault." Star jumped to her feet, no longer looking tired, and put arm around my waist as I got up, while she held the Egg of the Phoenix with the other. "Oh, darling, I'm so happy! We made it! Welcome home, my Hero!"

"Where?" I was sluggy—too many time zones, too many ideas, too fast.

"Home. My home. Your home now—if you'll have it. *Our* home."

"Uh, I see . . . my Empress."

She stomped her foot. "Don't call me that!"

"The proper form of address," said Rufo, "is 'Your Wisdom.' Isn't it, Your Wisdom?"

"Oh, Rufo, shut up. Go fetch clothes for us."

He shook his head. "War's over and I just got paid off. Fetch 'em yourself, Granny."

"Rufo, you're impossible."

"Sore at me, Granny?"

"I will be if you don't stop calling me 'Granny.'" Suddenly she handed the Egg to me, put her arms around Rufo and kissed him. "No, Granny's not sore at you," she said softly. "You always were a naughty child and I'll never quite forget the time you put oysters in my bed. But I guess you came by it honestly—from your grandmother." She kissed him again and mussed his fringe of white hair. "Granny loves you. Granny always will. Next to Oscar, I think you are about perfect—aside from being an unbearable,

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untruthful, spoiled, disobedient, disrespectful brat."

"That's better," he said. "Come to think of it, I feel the same way about you. What do you want to wear?"

"Mmm . . . get out a lot of things. It's been so long since I had a decent wardrobe." She turned back to me. "What would you like to wear, my Hero?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything. Whatever you think is appropriate—Your Wisdom."

"Oh, darling, please don't call me that. Not ever." She seemed suddenly about to cry.

"All right. What shall I call you?"

"Star is the name you gave me. If you must call me something else, you could call me your 'princess.' I'm not a princess—and I'm not an 'empress' either; that's a poor translation. But I *like* being 'your princess'—the way you say it. Or it can be 'lively wench' or any of lots of things you've been calling me." She looked up at me very soberly. "Just like before. Forever."

"I'll try . . . my princess."

"My Hero."

"But there seems to be a lot I don't know."

She shifted from English to Nevian. "Milord husband, I wished to tell all. I sighed to tell you. And milord will be told everything. But I held mortal fear that milord, if told too soon, would refuse to come with me. Not to the Black Tower, but to here. Our home."

"Perhaps you chanced wisely," I answered in the same language. "But I am here, milady wife—my princess. So tell me. I wish it."

She shifted back to English. "I'll talk, I'll talk. But it will take time. Darling, will you hold your horses just a bit longer? Having been patient with me—so very patient, my love!—for so long?"

"Okay," I agreed. "I'll string along. But, look, I don't know the streets in this neighborhood, I'll need some hints. Remember the mistake I made with old Jocko just from not knowing local customs."

"Yes, dear, I will. But don't worry, customs are simple here. Primitive societies are always more complex than civilized ones—and this one isn't primitive." Rufo dumped then a great heap of clothing at her feet. She turned away, a hand still on my arm, put a finger to her mouth with a very intent, almost worried look. "Now let me see. What shall I wear?"

"Complex" is a relative matter; I'll sketch only the outlines.

Center is the capital planet of the Twenty Universes. But Star was not 'Empress' and it is not an empire.

I'll go on calling her "Star" as hundreds of names were hers and I'll call it an "empire" because no

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other word is close, and I'll refer to "emperors" and "empresses"—and to the Empress, my wife.

Nobody knows how many universes there are. Theory places no limit: any and all possibilities is unlimited number of combinations of "natural" laws, each sheaf appropriate to its own universe. But this is just theory and Occam's Razor is much too dull. All that is known in Twenty Universes is that twenty have been discovered, that each has its own laws, and that most of them have planets, or sometimes "places," where human beings live. I won't try to say what lives elsewhere.

The Twenty Universes includes many real empires. Our Galaxy in our universe has its stellar empires—yet so huge is our Galaxy that our human race may never meet another, save through the Gates that link the universes. Some planets have no known Gates. Earth has many and that is its single importance; otherwise it rates as a backward slum.

Seven thousand years ago a notion was born for coping with political problems too big to handle. It was modest at first: How could a planet be run without ruining it? This planet's people included expert cyberneticists but otherwise were hardly farther along than we are; they are still burning the barn to get the rats and catching their thumbs in machinery. These experimenters picked an outstanding ruler and tried to help him.

Nobody knew why this bloke was so successful but he was and that was enough; they weren't hipped on theory. They gave him cybernatic help, taping for him all crises in their history, all known details, what was done, and the outcomes of each, all organized so that he could consult it almost as you consult your memory.

It worked. In time he was supervising the whole planet—Center it was, with another name then. He didn't rule it, he just untangled hard cases.

They taped also everything this first "Emperor" did, good and bad, for guidance of his successor.

The Egg of the Phoenix is a cybernetic record of the experiences of two hundred and three "emperors" and "empresses," most of whom "ruled" all the known universes. Like a foldbox, it is bigger inside than out. In use, it is more the size of the Great Pyramid.

Phoenix legends abound throughout the Universes: the creature that dies but is immortal, rising ever young from its own ashes. The Egg *is* such a wonder, for it is far more than a taped library now; it is a print, right down to their unique personalities, of *all* experience of *all* that line from His Wisdom IX through Her Wisdom CCIV, Mrs. Oscar Gordon.

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The office is not hereditary. Star's ancestors include His Wisdom I and most of the other wisdoms—but millions of others have as much "royal" blood. Her grandson Rufo was not picked although he shares all her ancestors. Or perhaps he turned it down. I never asked, it would have reminded him of a time one of his uncles did something obscene and improbable. Nor is it a question one asks.

Once tapped, a candidate's education includes everything from how to cook tripe to highest mathematics—including all forms of personal combat, for it was realized millenia ago that, no matter how well he was guarded, the victim would wear better if he himself could fight like an angry buzz saw. I stumbled on this through asking my beloved an awkward question.

I was still trying to get used to the fact that I had married a grandmother, whose grandson looked older than I did and was even older than he looked. The people of Center live longer than we do anyway and both Star and Rufo had received "Long-Life" treatment. This takes getting used to. I asked Star, "How long do you 'wisdoms' live?"

"Not too long," she answered almost harshly. "Usually we are assassinated."

(My big mouth—)

A candidate's training includes travel in many worlds—not all planets-places inhabited by human beings; nobody lives that long. But many. After a candidate completes all this and if selected as heir, postgraduate work begins: the Egg itself. The heir has imprinted in him (her) the memories, the very personalities, of past emperors. He (*She*) becomes an integration of them. Star-Plus. A supernova. Her Wisdom.

The living personality is dominant but all that mob is there, too. Without using the Egg Star could recall experiences that happened to people dead many centuries. *With* the Egg—herself hooked into the cybernet—she had seven thousand years of sharp, just-yesterday memories.

Star admitted to me that she had hesitated ten years before accepting the nomination. She hadn't *wanted* to be all those people; she had wanted to go on being herself, living as she pleased. But the methods used to pick candidates (I don't know them, they are lodged in the Egg) seem almost infallible; only three have ever refused.

When Star became empress she had barely started the second half of her training, having had imprinted in her only seven of her predecessors. Imprinting does not take long but the victim needs recovery time between prints—for she gets every damned thing that ever happened to him, bad and good: the time he was cruel to a pet as a child and his recalled

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shame of it in his mature years, the loss of his virginity, the unbearably tragic time that he goofed a really serious one—*all* of it.

"I *must* experience their mistakes," Star told me. "Mistakes are the only certain way to learn."

So the whole weary structure is based on subjecting *one person* to all the miserable errors of seven thousand years.

Mercifully the Egg doesn't have to be used often. Most of the time Star could be herself, no more bothered by imprinted memories than you are over that nasty remark in second grade. Most problems Star could solve shooting from the hip—no recourse to the Black Room and a full hookup.

For the one thing that stood out as this empirical way of running an empire grew up was that the answer to most problems was: *Don't do anything.*

Always King Log, never King Stork—"Live and let live." "Let well enough alone." "Time is the best physician." "Let sleeping dogs lie." "Leave them alone and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them."

Even positive edicts of the Imperium were usually negative in form: Thou Shalt Not Blow Up Thy Neighbors' Planet. (Blow up your own if you wish.) Hands off the guardians of the Gates. Don't demand justice, you too will be judged.

Above all, don't put serious problems to a popular vote. Oh, there is no rule against local democracy, just in imperial matters. Old Rufo—excuse me; *Doctor* Rufo, a most distinguished comparative culturologist (with a low taste for slumming)—Rufe told me that every human race tries every political form and that democracy is used in many primitive societies . . . but he didn't know of any civilized planet using it as "Vox Populi, Vox Dei" translates as: "My God! How did we get in *this* mess!"

But Rufe claimed to enjoy democracy—any time he felt depressed he sampled Washington, and the antics of the French Parliament were second only to the antics of French women.

I asked him how advanced societies ran things?

His brow wrinkled. "Mostly they don't."

That described the Empress of Twenty Universes: Mostly she didn't.

But sometimes she did. She might say: "This mess will clear up if you will take that troublemaker there— What's your name? You with the goatee. —out and shoot him. Do it now." (I was present. They did it now. He was head of the delegation which had brought the problem to her—some fuss between intergalactic trading empires in the VIIth universe—and his chief deputy pinned his arms and his own delegates dragged

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him outside and killed him. Star went on drinking coffee. It's better coffee than we get back home and I was so upset that I poured myself a cup.)

An emperor has no power. Yet, if Star decided that a certain planet should be removed, people would get busy and there would be a nova in that sky. Star has never done this but it has been done in the past. Not often— His Wisdom will search his soul (and the Egg) a long time before decreeing anything so final even when his hypertrophied horse sense tells him that there is no other solution.

The emperor is sole source of Imperial law, sole judge, sole executive—and does very little and has no way to enforce his rulings. What he or she does have is enormous prestige from a system that has worked for seven millenia. This non-system holds together by having no togetherness, no uniformity, never seeking perfection, no utopias—just answers good enough to get by, with lots of looseness and room for many ways and attitudes.

Local affairs are local. Infanticide?—they're your babies, your planet. PTA's, movie censorship, disaster relief—the Empire is ponderously unhelpful.

The Crisis of the Egg started long before I was born. His Wisdom CCIII was assassinated and the Egg stolen at the same time. Some baddies wanted power—and the Egg, by its unique resources, has latent in it key to such power as Genghis Khan never dreamed.

Why should anybody want power? I can't understand it. But some do, and they did.

So Star came to office half-trained, faced by the greatest crisis the Empire had ever suffered, and cut off from her storehouse of Wisdom.

But not helpless. Imprinted in her was the experience of seven hyper-sensible men and she had all the cyber-computer system save that unique part known as the Egg. First she had to find out what had been done with the Egg. It wasn't safe to mount an attack on the planet of the baddies; it might destroy the Egg.

Available were ways to make a man talk if one didn't mind using him up. Star didn't mind. I don't mean anything so crude as rack and tongs. This was more like peeling an onion, and they peeled several.

Karth-Hokesh is so deadly that it was named for the only explorers to visit it and come back alive. (We were in a "garden subdivision," the rest is much worse.) The baddies made no attempt to stay there; they just cached the Egg and set guards and booby traps around it and on the routes to it.

I asked Rufo, "What use was the Egg *there?*"

"None," he agreed. "But they soon learned that it was no use

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anywhere—without *Her*. They needed either its staff of cybernetics . . . or they needed Her Wisdom. They couldn't open the Egg. *She* is the only one who can do that unassisted. So they baited a trap for *Her*. Capture Her Wisdom, or kill Her—capture by preference, kill Her if need be and then try for key people here at Center. But they didn't dare risk the second while She was alive."

Star started a search to determine the best chance of recovering the Egg. Invade Karth-Hokesh? The machines said, "Hell, no!" I would say No, too. How do you mount an invasion into a place where a man not only can't eat or drink anything local but can't breathe the air more than a few hours? When a massive assault will destroy what you are after? When your beachheads are two limited Gates?

The computers kept coming up with a silly answer, no matter how the question was framed.

Me.

A "Hero" that is—a man with a strong back, a weak mind, and a high regard for his own skin. Plus other traits. A raid by a thus-and-so man, if aided by Star herself, might succeed. Rufo was added by a hunch Star had (hunches of Their Wisdoms being equal to strokes of genius) and the machines confirmed this. "I was drafted," said Rufo. "So I refused. But I never have had any sense where *She* is concerned, damn it; She spoiled me when I was a kid."

There followed years of search for the specified man. (Me, again—I'll never know why.) Meanwhile brave men were feeling out the situation and, eventually, mapping the Tower. Star herself reconnoitred, and got acquainted in Nevia, too.

(Is Nevia part of the "Empire?" It is and it isn't. Nevia's planet has the only Gates to Karth-Hokesh other than one from the planet of the baddies; that is its importance to the Empire—and the Empire isn't important to Nevia at all.)

This "Hero" was most likely to be found on a barbaric planet such as Earth. Star checked, and turned down, endless candidates winnowed from many rough peoples before her nose told her that I might do.

I asked Rufo what chance the machines gave us?

"What makes you say that?" he demanded.

"Well, I know a little of cybernetics."

"You think you do. Still—There was a prediction. 13% success, 17% no game—and 70% death for us all."

I whistled. "*You* should whistle!" he said indignantly. "You didn't know any more than a cavalry horse knows. You had nothing to be scared of."

"I was scared."

"You didn't have time to be. It

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was planned so. Our one chance lay in reckless speed and utter surprise. But I *knew*. Son, when you told us to wait, there in the Tower, and disappeared and didn't come back, why, I was so scared I caught up on my regretting."

Once set up, the raid happened as I told it. Or pretty much so, although I may have seen what my mind could accept rather than exactly what happened. I mean "magic." How many times have savages concluded "magic" when a "civilized" man came along with something the savage couldn't understand? How often is some tag, such as "television", accepted by cultural savages (who nevertheless twist dials) when "magic" would be the honest word?

Still, Star never insisted on that word. She accepted it when *I* insisted on it.

But I would be disappointed if *everything* I saw turned out to be something Western Electric will build once Bell Labs works the bugs out. There ought to be *some* magic, somewhere, just for flavor.

Oh, yes, putting me to sleep for the first transition was to keep from scaring a savage silly. Nor did the "black biers" cross over—that was posthypnotic suggestion, by an expert: my wife.

Did I say what happened to the baddies? Nothing. Their Gates were destroyed; they are isolated until they develop star travel. Good enough, by the sloppy standards of the Empire. Their Wisdoms never carry grudges.

XVIII

CENTER IS A LOVELY PLANET, Earthlike but lacking Earth's faults. It has been retailored over millenia to make it a Never-Never Land. Desert and snow and jungle were saved enough for pleasure; floods and other disasters were engineered out of existence.

It is uncrowded but has a large population for its size—that of Mars but with oceans. Surface gravity is almost that of Earth. (A higher constant, I understand.) About half the population is transient, as its great beauty and unique cultural assets—focus of twenty universes—make it a tourist's paradise. Everything is done for the comfort of visitors with an all-out thoroughness like that of the Swiss but with technology not known on Earth.

Star and I had residences a dozen places around the planet (and endless others in other universes); they ranged from palaces to a tiny fishing lodge where Star did her own cooking. Mostly we lived in apartments in an artificial mountain that housed the Egg and its staff; adjacent were halls, conference rooms, secretariat, etc. If Star felt like working, she wanted such things at hand. But a system ambassador or visiting emperor of a hundred systems had as much

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chance of being invited into our private home as a hobo at the back door of a Beverly Hills mansion has of being invited into the drawing room.

But if Star happened to like him, she might fetch him home for a midnight snack. She did that once—a funny little leprechaun with four arms and a habit of tap-dancing his gestures. But she did no official entertaining and felt no obligation to attend social affairs. She did not hold press conferences, make speeches, receive delegations of Girl Scouts, lay cornerstones, proclaim special "Days", make ceremonial appearances, sign papers, deny rumors, nor any of the time-gnawing things that sovereigns and V.I.P.'s do on Earth.

She consulted individuals, often summoning them from other universes, and she had at her disposal all the news from everywhere, organized in a system that had been developed over centuries. It was through this system that she decided what problems to consider. One chronic complaint was that the Imperium ignored "vital questions"—and so it did. Her Wisdom passed judgment only on problems she selected; the bedrock of the system was that most problems solved themselves.

We often went to social events; we both enjoyed parties and, for Her Wisdom and Consort, there was endless choice. There was one negative protocol: Star neither accepted nor regretted invitations, showed up when she pleased and refused to be fussed over. This was a drastic change for capital society as her predecessor had imposed protocol more formal than of the Vatican.

One hostess complained to me about how *dull* society had become under the new rules—maybe I could do something?

I did. I looked up Star and told her the remark, whereupon we left and joined a drunken artists' ball —a luau!

Center is such a hash of cultures, races, customs, and styles that it has few rules. The one invariant custom was: Don't impose *your* customs on *me*. People wore what they did at home, or experimented with other styles; any social affair looked like a free-choice costume ball. A guest could show up at a swank party stark naked without causing talk—and some did, a small minority. I don't mean non-humans or hirsute humans; clothes are not for them. I mean humans who would look at home in New York in American clothes —and others who would attract notice even in l'Ile du Levant because they have no hair at all, not even eyebrows. This is a source of pride to them; it shows their "superiority" to us hairy apes, they are as proud as a Georgia cracker is of his deficiency in melanin. So they go naked oftener than other human races. I found their ap-

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pearance startling but one gets used to it.

Star wore clothes outside our home, so I did. Star would never miss a chance to dress up, an endearing weakness that made it possible to forget, at times, her Imperial status. She never dressed twice alike and was ever trying something new—and disappointed if I didn't notice. Some of her choices would cause heart failure even on a Riviera beach. She believed that a woman's costume was a failure unless it made men want to tear it off.

One of Star's most effective outfits was the simplest. Rufo happened to be with us and she got a sudden notion to dress as we had on the Quest of the Egg—and biff, bang, costumes were available, or manufactured to order, as may be; Nevian clothes are most uncommon in Center.

Bows, arrows, and quivers were produced with the same speed and Merry Men were we. It made me feel good to buckle on the Lady Vivamus; she had been hanging untouched on a wall of my study ever since the great black Tower.

Star stood, feet planted wide, fists on hips, head thrown back, eyes bright, and cheeks flushed. "Oh, this is fun! I feel good, I feel *young!* Darling, promise me, promise me truly, that some day we will again go on an adventure! I get so damn' sick of being sensible."

She spoke English, as the language of Center is ill suited to such ideas. It's a pidgin language with thousands of years of imports and changes and is uninflected, positional, and flat.

"Suits," I agreed. "How about it, Rufo? Want to walk that Glory Road?"

"After they pave it."

"Guff. You'll come, I know you. Where and when, Star? Never mind 'where'—just 'when.' Skip the party and start right now!"

Suddenly she was not merry. "Darling, you know I can't. I'm less than a third of the way through my training."

"I should have busted that Egg when I found it."

"Don't be cross, darling. Let's go to the party and have fun."

We did. Travel on Center is by apports, artificial "Gates" that require no "magic" (or perhaps still more); one sets destination like punching buttons in an elevator, so there is no traffic problem in cities—nor a thousand other unpleasant things; they don't let the bones show in their cities. Tonight Star chose to get off short of destination, swagger through a park, and make an entrance. She knows how well tights suit her long legs and solid buttocks.

Folks, we were a sensation! Swords aren't worn in Center, save possibly by visitors. Bows and arrows are hen's teeth, too. We were as conspicuous as a knight in armor on Fifth Avenue.

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Star was as happy as a kid playing trick-or-treat. So was I. I felt two ax handles across the shoulders and wanted to hunt dragons.

It was a ball not unlike one on Earth. (According to Rufo, all our races everywhere have the same basic entertainment: get together in mobs to dance, drink, and gossip. He claimed that the stag affair and the hen party are symptoms of a sick culture. I won't argue.) We swaggered down a grand staircase, music stopped, people stared and gasped—and Star enjoyed being noticed. Musicians got raggedly back to work and guests went back to the negative politeness the Empress usually demanded. But we still got attention. I had thought that the story of the Quest of the Egg was a state secret. But, even if known, I still would have expected the details to be known only to us three.

Not so. Everyone knew what those costumes meant, and more. I was at the buffet, sopping up brandy and a Dagwood of my own invention, when I was concerned by Sheherezade's sister, the pretty one. She was of one of the human-but-not-like-us races. She was dressed in rubies the size of your thumb and reasonably opaque cloth. She stood about five-five, barefooted, weighed maybe one twenty and her waist couldn't have been over fifteen inches, which exaggerated two other measurements that did not need it. She was brunette, with the slantiest eyes I've ever seen. She looked like a beautiful cat and looked at me the way a cat looks at a bird.

"Self," she announced.

"Speak."

"Sverlani. World—" (Name and code—I had never heard of it.) "Student food designer, mathematico-sybaritic."

"Oscar Gordon. Earth. Soldier." I omitted the I.D. for Earth; she knew who I was.

"Questions?"

"Ask."

"Is sword?"

"Is."

She looked at it and her pupils dilated. "Is-was sword destroy construct guard Egg?" ("Is this sword now present the direct successor in space-time sequential change, aside from theoretical anomalies involved in between-universe transitions, of the sword used to kill the Never-Born?" The double tense of the verb, present-past, stipulates and brushes aside the concept that identity is a meaningless abstraction—is this the sword you actually used, in the everyday meaning, and don't kid me, soldier, I'm no child.)

"Was-is," I agreed. ("I was there and I guarantee that I followed it all the way here, so it still is.")

She gave a little gasp and her nipples stood up. Around each was painted, or perhaps tattooed, the multi-universal design we call

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"Wall of Troy"—and so strong was her reaction that Ilium's ramparts crumpled again.

"Touch?" she said pleadingly.

"Touch."

"Touch *twice?*" ("Please, may I handle it enough to get the feel of it? Pretty please, with sugar on it! I ask too much and it is your right to refuse, but I guarantee not to hurt it"—they get mileage out of words, but the flavor is in the manner.)

I didn't want to, not the Lady Vivamus. But I'm a sucker for pretty girls. "Touch . . . twice," I grudged. I drew it and handed it to her guard foremost, alert to grab it before she put somebody's eye out or stabbed herself in the foot.

She accepted it gingerly, eyes and mouth big, grasping it by the guard instead of the grip. I had to show her. Her hand was far too small for it; her hands and feet, like her waist, were ultra slender.

She spotted the inscription. "Means?"

Dum vivimus, vivamus doesn't translate well, not because they can't understand the idea but because it's water to a fish. How else would one live? But I tried. "Touch-twice life. Eat. Drink. Laugh."

She nodded thoughtfully, then poked the air, wrist bent and elbow out. I couldn't stand it, so I took it from her, dropped slowly into a foil guard, lunged in high line, recovered—a move so graceful that big hairy men look good in it. It's why ballerinas study fencing.

I saluted and gave it back to her, then adjusted her right elbow and wrist and left arm—this is why ballerinas get half rates, it's fun for the swordmaster. She lunged, almost pinking a guest in his starboard ham.

I took it back, wiped the blade, sheathed it. We had gathered a solid gallery. I picked up my Dagwood from the buffet, but she wasn't done with me. "Self jump sword?"

I choked. If she understood the meaning—or if I did—I was being propositioned the most gently I had ever been, in Center. Usually it's blunt. But surely Star hadn't spread the details of our wedding ceremony? Rufo? I hadn't told him but Star might have.

When I didn't answer, she made herself clear and did not keep her voice down. "Self unvirgin unmother unpregnant fertile."

I explained as politely as the language permits, which isn't very, that I was dated up. She dropped the subject, looked at the Dagwood. "Bite touch taste?"

That was another matter, I passed it over. She took a hearty bite, chewed thoughtfully, looked pleased. "Xenic. Primitive. Robust. Strong dissonance. Good art." Then she drifted away, leaving me wondering.

Inside of ten minutes the ques-

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tion was put to me again. I received more propositions than at any other party in Center and I'm sure the sword accounted for the bull market. To be sure, propositions came my way at every social event; I was Her Wisdom's consort. I could have been an orangutan and offers still would have been made. Some hirsutes looked like orangutans and were socially acceptable but I could have smelled like one. And behaved worse. The truth was that many ladies were curious about what the Empress took to bed, and the fact that I was a savage, or at best a barbarian, made them more curious. There wasn't any taboo against laying it on the line and quite a few did.

But I was still on my honeymoon. Anyhow, if I had accepted all those offers, I would have gone up with the window shade. But I enjoyed hearing them once I quit cringing at the "Soda?—or ginger ale?" bluntness; it's good for anybody's morale to be asked.

As we were undressing that night I said, "Have fun, pretty things?"

Star yawned and grinned. "I certainly did. And so did you, old Eagle Scout. Why didn't you bring that kitten home?"

"What kitten?"

"You know what kitten. The one you were teaching to fence."

"Meeow!"

"No, no, dear. You should send for her. I heard her state her profession, and there is a strong connection between good cooking and good—"

"Woman, you talk too much!"

She switched from English to Nevian. "Yes, milord husband. No sound I shall utter that does not break unbidden from love-anguished lips."

"Milady wife beloved . . . sprite elemental of the Singing Waters—"

Nevian is more useful than the jargon they talk on Center.

Center is a fun place and a Wisdom's consort has a cushy time. After our first visit to Star's fishing lodge, I mentioned how nice it would be to go back someday and tickle a few trout at that lovely place, the Gate where we had entered Nevia. "I wish it were on Center."

"It shall be."

"Star. You would move it? I know that some Gates can handle real mass, but, even so—"

"No, no. But just as good. Let me see. It will take a day or so to have it stereoed and measured and air-typed and so forth. Water flow, those things. But meanwhile—There's nothing much beyond this wall, just a power plant and such. Say a door here and the place where we broiled the fish a hundred yards beyond. Be finished in a week, or we'll have a new architect. Suits?"

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"Star, you'll do no such thing."

"Why not, darling?"

"Tear up the whole house to give me a trout stream? Fantastic!"

"I don't think so."

"Well, it is. Anyhow, sweet, the idea is not to move that stream here, but to go *there.* A vacation."

She sighed. "How I would love a vacation."

"You took an imprint today. Your voice is different."

"It wears off, Oscar."

"Star, you're taking them too fast. You're wearing yourself out."

"Perhaps. But I must be the judge of that, as you know."

"As I *don't* know! You can judge the whole goddam creation —as you do and I know it—but *I,* your husband, must judge whether you are overworking— and stop it."

"Darling, darling!"

There were too many incidents like that.

I was not jealous of her. That ghost of my savage past had been laid in Nevia, I was not haunted by it again.

Nor is Center a place such ghost is likely to walk. Center has as many marriage customs as it has cultures—thousands. They cancel out. Some humans there are monogamous by instinct, as swans are said to be. So it can't be classed as "virtue." As courage is bravery in the face of fear, virtue is right conduct in the face of temptation. If there is no temptation, there can be no virtue. But these inflexible monogamists were no hazard. If someone, through ignorance, propositioned one of these chaste ladies, he risked neither a slap nor a knife; she would turn him down and go right on talking. Nor would it matter if her husband overheard; jealousy is never learned in a race automatically monogamous. Not that I ever tested it; to me they looked—and smelled—like spoiled bread dough. Where there is no temptation there is no virtue.

But I had chances to show "virtue." That kitten with the wasp waist tempted me—and I learned that she was of a culture in which females may not marry until they prove themselves pregnable, as in parts of the South Seas and certain places in Europe; she was breaking no taboos of her tribe. I was tempted more by another gal, a sweetie with a lovely figure, a delightful sense of humor, and one of the best dancers in any universe. She didn't write it on the sidewalk; she just let me know that she was neither too busy nor uninterested, using that argot with skillful indirection.

This was refreshing. Downright "American." I did inquire (elsewhere) into the customs of her tribe and found that, while they were rigid as to marriage, they were permissive otherwise. I would never do as a son-in-law but the window was open even

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though the door was locked.

So I chickened. I gave myself a soul-searching and admitted curiosity as morbid as that of any female who propositioned me simply because I was Star's consort. Sweet little Zhai-ee-van was one of those who didn't wear clothes. She grew them on the spot; from tip of her nose to her tiny toes she was covered in soft, sleek, grey fur, remarkably like chinchilla. Gorgeous!

I didn't have the heart, she was too nice a kid.

But this temptation I admitted to Star—and Star implied gently that I must have muscles between my ears; Zhai-ee-van was an outstanding artiste even among her own people, who were esteemed as most talented devotees of Eros.

I stayed chicken. A romp with a kid that sweet should involve love, some at least, and it wasn't love, just that beautiful fur—along with a fear that a romp with Zhai-ee-van could turn into love and she couldn't marry me even if Star turned me loose.

Or didn't turn me loose—Center has no rule against polygamy. Some religions there have rules for and against this and that but this mixture of cultures has endless religions and they cancel each other the way conflicting customs do. Culturologists state a "law" of religious freedom which they say is invariant: religious freedom in a cultural complex is inversely proportional to the strength of the strongest religion. This is supposed to be one case of a general invariant, that all freedoms arise from cultural conflicts because a custom which is not opposed by its negative is mandatory and always regarded as a "law of nature."

Rufo didn't agree; he said his colleagues stated as equations things which are not mensurate and not definable—holes in their heads!—and that freedom was never more than a happy accident because the common jerk, all human races, hates and fears all freedom, not only for his neighbors but for himself, and stamps it out whenever possible.

Back to Topic "A"—Centrists use every sort of marriage contract. Or none. They practice domestic partnership, coition, propagation, friendship, and love—but not necessarily all at once nor with the same person. Contracts could be as complex as a corporate merger, specifying duration, purposes, duties, responsibilities, number and sex of children, genetic selection methods, whether host mothers were to be hired, conditions for canceling and options for extension—anything but "marital fidelity." It is axiomatic there that this is unenforceable and therefore not contractual.

But marital fidelity is commoner there than it is on Earth; it simply is not legislated. They have

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an ancient proverb reading "Women and Cats." It means: "Women and Cats do as they please, and men and dogs might as well relax to it." It has its opposite: "Men and Weather" which is blunter and at least as old, since the weather has long been under control.

The usual contract is no contract; he moves his clothes into her home and stays—until she dumps them outside the door. This form is highly thought of because of its stability: a woman who "tosses his shoes" has a tough time finding another man brave enough to risk her temper.

My "contract" with Star was no more than that, if contracts, laws, and customs applied to the Empress, which they did not and could not. But that was not the source of my increasing unease.

Believe me, I was *not* jealous.

But I was increasingly fretted by those dead men crowding her mind.

One evening as we were dressing for some whingding she snapped at me. I had been prattling about how I had spent my day, being tutored in mathematics, and no doubt had been as entertaining as a child reporting a day in kindergarten. But I was enthusiastic, a new world was opening to me—and Star was always patient.

But she snapped at me in a baritone voice.

I stopped cold. "You were imprinted today!"

I could feel her shift gears. "Oh, forgive me, darling! No, I'm not myself. I'm His Wisdom CLXXXII."

I did a fast sum. "That's fourteen you've taken since the Quest—and you took only seven in all the years before that. What the hell are you trying to do? Burn yourself out? Become an idiot?"

She started to scorch me. Then she answered gently, "No, I am not risking anything of the sort."

"That isn't what I hear."

"What you may have heard has no weight, Oscar, as no one else can judge—either my capacity—or what it means to accept an imprint. Unless you have been talking to my heir?"

"No." I knew she had selected him and I assumed that he had taken a print or two—a standard precaution against assassination. But I hadn't met him, didn't want to, and didn't know who he was.

"Then forget what you've been told. It is meaningless." She sighed. "But, darling, if you don't mind, I won't go tonight; best I go to bed and sleep. Old Stinky CLXXXII is the nastiest person I've ever been—a brilliant success in a critical age, you must read about him. But inside he was a bad-tempered beast who hated the very people he helped. He's fresh in me now, I must keep him chained."

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"Okay, let's go to bed."

Star shook her head. " 'Sleep,' I said. I'll use autosuggestion and by morning you won't know he's been here. You go to the party. Find an adventure and forget that you have a difficult wife."

I went but I was too bad-tempered even to consider "adventures".

Old Nasty wasn't the worst. I can hold my own in a row—and Star, Amazon though she is, is not big enough to handle me. If she got rough, she would at last get that spanking. Nor would I fear interference from guards; that had been settled from scratch: When we two were alone together, we were private. Any third person changed that, nor did Star have privacy alone, even in her bath. Whether her guards were male or female I don't know, nor would she have cared. Guards were never in sight. So our spats were private and perhaps did us both good, as temporary relief.

But "the Saint" was harder to take than Old Nasty. He was His Wisdom CXLI and was so goddam noble and spiritual and holier-than-thou that I went fishing for three days. Star herself was robust and full of ginger and joy in life; this bloke didn't drink, smoke, chew gum, nor utter an unkind word. You could almost see Star's halo while she was under his influence.

Worse, he had renounced sex when he consecrated himself to the Universes and this had a shocking effect on Star; sweet submissiveness wasn't her style. So I went fishing.

I've one good thing to say for the Saint. Star says that he was the most unsuccessful emperor in all that long line, with genius for doing the wrong thing from pious motives, so she learned more from him than any other; he made every mistake in the book. He was assassinated by disgusted customers after only fifteen years, which isn't long enough to louse up anything as ponderous as a multi-universe empire.

His Wisdom CXXXVII was a Her—and Star was absent two days. When she came home she explained. "Had to, dear. I've always thought I was a rowdy bitch —but she shocked even me."

"How?"

"I ain't talkin', Guv'nor. I gave myself intensive treatment to bury her where you'll never meet her."

"I'm curious."

"I know you are and that's why I drove a stake through her heart —rough job, she's my direct ancestor. But I was afraid you might like her better than you do me. That unspeakable trull!"

I'm still curious.

Most of them weren't bad Joes. But our marriage would have been smoother if I had never known they were there. It's easier to have a wife who is a touch batty than

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one who is several platoons—most of them men. To be aware of their ghostly presence even when Star's own personality was in charge did my libido no good. But I must concede that Star knew the male viewpoint better than any other woman in any history. She didn't have to guess what would please a man; she knew more about it than I did, from "experience"—and was explosively uninhibited about sharing her unique knowledge.

I shouldn't complain.

But I did, I blamed her for being those other people. She endured my unjust complaints better than I endured what I felt to be the injustice in my situation vis-à-vis all that mob of ghosts.

Those ghosts weren't the worst fly in the soup.

I did not have a job. I don't mean nine-to-five and cut the grass on Saturdays and get drunk at the country club that night; I mean I didn't have any purpose. Ever look at a male lion in a zoo? Fresh meat on time, females supplied, no hunters to worry about —He's got it made, hasn't he?

Then why does he look bored!

I didn't know I had a problem, at first. I had a beautiful and loving wife; I was so wealthy that there was no way to count it; I lived in a most luxurious home in a city more lovely than any on Earth; everybody I met was nice to me and; best second only to my wonderful wife, I had endless chance to "go to college" in a marvelous and unEarthly sense, with no need to chase a pigskin. Nor a sheepskin. I need never stop and had any conceivable help. I mean, suppose Albert Einstein drops everything to help with your algebra, pal, or Rand Corporation and General Electric team up to devise visual aids to make something easier for you.

This is luxury greater than riches.

I soon found that I could not drink the ocean even held to my lips. Knowledge on Earth alone has grown so out of hand that no man can grasp it—so guess what the bulk is in Twenty Universes, each with its laws, its histories, and Star alone knows how many civilizations.

In a candy factory, employés are urged to eat all they want. They soon stop.

I never stopped entirely; knowledge has more variety. But my studies lacked purpose. The Secret Name of God is no more to be found in twenty universes than in one—and all other subjects are the same size unless you have a natural bent.

I had no bent, I was a dilettante —and I realized it when I saw that my tutors were bored with me. So I let most of them go, stuck with math and multi-universe history, quit trying to know it all.

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I thought about going into business. But to enjoy business you must be a businessman at heart (I'm not), or you have to need dough. I had dough; all I could do was lose it—or, if I won, I would never know whether word had gone out (from any government anywhere): Don't buck the Empress's consort, we will make good our losses.

Same with poker. I introduced the game and it caught on fast—and I found that I could no longer play it. Poker must be serious or it's nothing—but when you own an ocean of money, adding or losing a few drops means *nothing*.

I should explain—Her Wisdom's "civil list" may not have been as large as the expenditures of many big spenders in Center; the place is rich. But it was as big as Star wanted it to be, a bottomless well of wealth. I don't know how many worlds split the tab, but call it twenty thousand with three billion people each—it was more than that.

A penny each from 60,000,000,000,000 people is six hundred billion dollars. The figures mean nothing except to show that spreading it so thin that nobody could feel it still meant more money than I could dent. Star's non-government of her un-Empire was an expense, I suppose—but her personal expenses, and mine, *no matter how lavish*, were irrelevant.

King Midas lost interest in his piggy bank. So did I.

Oh, I spent money. (I never touched any—unnecessary.) Our "flat" (I won't call it a palace)—our home had a gymnasium more imaginative than any university gym; I had a salle d'armes added and did a lot of fencing, almost every day with all sorts of weapons. I ordered foils made to match the Lady Vivamus and the best swordmasters in several worlds took turns helping me. I had a range added, too, and had my bow picked up from that Gate cave in Karth-Hokesh, and trained in archery and in other aimed weapons. Oh, I spent money as I pleased.

But it wasn't much fun.

I was sitting in my study one day, doing not a damn thing but brood, while I played with a bowlful of jewels.

I had fiddled with jewelry design a while. It had interested me in high school; I had worked for a jeweler one summer. I can sketch and was fascinated by lovely stones. He lent me books, I got others from the library—and once he made up one of my designs.

I had a Calling.

But jewelers are not draft-deferred so I dropped it—until Center.

You see, there was no way for me to give Star a present, unless I made it. So I did. I made costume jewelry of real stones, study-

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ing it (expert help, as usual), sending for a lavish selection of stones, drawing designs, sending stones and drawings out to be made up.

I knew that Star enjoyed jeweled costumes; I knew she liked them naughty—not in the sense of crowding the taboos, there weren't any—but provocative, gilding the lily, accentuating what hardly needs it.

The things I designed would have seemed at home in a French revue—but of real gems. Sapphires and gold suited Star's blonde beauty and I used them. But she could wear any color and I used other gems, too.

Star was delighted with my first try and wore it that evening. I was proud of it; I had swiped the design from memory of a costume worn by a showgirl in a Frankfurt nightclub my first night out of the Army—a G-string deal, transparent long skirt open from the hip on one side and with sequins on it (*I* used sapphires), a thing that wasn't a bra but an emphasizer, completely jeweled, and a doohickey in her hair to match. High golden sandals with sapphire heels.

Star was warmly grateful for others that followed.

But I learned something. I'm not a jewelry designer. I saw no hope of matching the professionals who catered to the wealthy in Center. I soon realized that Star wore my designs because they were my gift, just as mama pins up the kindergarten drawings that sonny brings home. So I quit.

This bowl of gems had been kicking around my study for weeks—fire opals, sardonyx, carnelians, diamonds and turquoise and rubies, moonstones and sapphires and garnets, peridot, emeralds, chrysolite—many with no English names. I ran them through my fingers, watching the many-colored fire falls, and felt sorry for myself. I wondered how much these pretty marbles would cost on Earth? I couldn't guess within a million dollars.

I didn't bother to lock them up at night. And *I* was the bloke who had quit college for lack of tuition and hamburgers.

I pushed them aside and went to my window—there because I had told Star that I didn't like not having a window in my study. That was on arrival and I didn't find out for months how much had been torn down to please me; I had thought they had just cut through a wall.

It was a beautiful view, more a park than a city, studded but not cluttered with lovely buildings. It was hard to realize that it was a city bigger than Tokyo; its "bones" didn't show and its people work even half a planet away.

There was a murmur soft as bees, like the muted roar one can never escape in New York—but

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softer, just enough to make me realize that I was surrounded by people, each with his job, his purpose, his function.

My function? Consort.

Gigolo!

Star, without realizing it, had introduced prostitution into a world that had never known it. An innocent world, where man and woman bedded together only for the reason that they both wanted to.

A prince consort is not a prostitute. He has his work and it is often tedious, representing his sovereign mate, laying corner stones, making speeches. Besides that, he has his duty as royal stud to ensure that the line does not die.

I had none of these. Not even the duty of entertaining Star—hell, within ten miles of me were millions of men who would jump at the chance.

The night before had been bad. It started badly and went on into one of those weary pillow conferences which married couples sometimes have, and aren't as healthy as a bang-up row. We had had one, as domestic as any working stiff worried over bills and the boss.

Star had done something she had never done before: brought work home. Five men, concerned with some intergalactic hassle—I never knew what as the discussion had been going on for hours and they sometimes spoke a language not known to me.

They ignored me, I was furniture. On Center introductions are rare; if you want to talk to someone, you say, "Self," and wait. If he doesn't answer, walk off. If he does, exchange identities.

None of them did, and I was damned if I would start it. As strangers in my home it was up to them. But they didn't act as if it was *my* home.

I sat there, the Invisible Man, getting madder and madder.

They went on arguing, while Star listened. Presently she summoned maids and they started undressing her, brushing her hair. Center is not America, I had no reason to feel shocked. What she was doing was being rude to them, treating *them* as furniture (she hadn't missed how they treated me).

One said pettishly, "Your Wisdom, I do wish you would listen as you agreed to." (I've expanded the argot.)

Star said coldly, "I am judge of my conduct. No one else is capable."

True. She could judge her conduct, they could not. Nor, I realized bitterly, could I. I had been feeling angry at her (even though I knew it didn't matter) for calling in her maids and starting to ready for bed with these lunks present—and I had intended to tell her not to let it happen again.

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I resolved not to raise that issue.

Shortly Star chopped them off. "He's right. You're wrong. Settle it that way. Get out."

But I did intend to sneak it in by objecting to her bringing "tradespeople" home.

Star beat me to the punch. The instant we were alone she said, "My love, forgive me. I agreed to hear this silly mix-up and it dragged on and on, then I thought I could finish it quickly if I got them out of chairs, made them stand up here, and made clear that I was bored. I never thought they would wrangle another hour before I could squeeze out the real issue. And I knew that, if I put it over till tomorrow, they would stretch it into hours. But the problem was important, I couldn't drop it." She sighed. "That ridiculous man—Yet such people scramble to high places. I considered having him fool-killed. Instead I must let him correct his error, or the situation will break out anew."

I couldn't even hint that she had ruled the way she had out of annoyance; the man she had chewed out was the one in whose favor she had ruled. So I said, "Let's go to bed, you're tired"—and then didn't have sense enough to refrain from judging her myself.

XIX

WE WENT TO BED.

Presently she said, "Oscar, you are displeased."

"I didn't say so."

"I feel it. Nor is it just tonight and those tedious clowns. You have been withdrawing yourself, unhappy." She waited.

"It's nothing."

"Oscar, anything which troubles you can never be 'nothing' to me. Although I may not realize it until I know what it is."

"Well—I feel so damn *useless!*"

She put her soft, strong hand on my chest. "To me you are not useless. Why do you feel useless to yourself?"

"Well—look at this bed!" It was a bed the like of which Americans never dream; it could do everything but kiss you goodnight—and, like the city, it was beautiful, its bones did not show. "This sack, at home, would cost more—if they could build it—than the best house my mother ever lived in."

She thought about that. "Would you like to send money to your mother?" She beckoned the bedside communicator. "Is Elmendor Air Force Base of America address enough?"

(I don't recall ever telling her where Mother lived.) "No, no!" I gestured at the talker, shutting it off. "I do *not* want to send her money. Her husband supports

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her. He won't take money from me. That's not the point."

"Then I don't see the point as yet. Beds do not matter, it is who is in a bed that counts. My darling, if you don't like this bed, we can get another. Or sleep on the floor. Beds do not matter."

"This bed is okay. The only thing wrong is that I didn't pay for it. You did. This house. My clothes. The food I eat. My—my *toys!* Every damned thing I have you gave me. Know what I am, Star? A gigolo! Do you know what a gigolo is? A somewhat-male prostitute."

One of my wife's most exasperating habits was, sometimes, to refuse to snap back at me when she knew I was spoiling for a row. She looked at me thoughtfully. "America is a busy place, isn't it? People work all the time."

"Well . . . yes."

"It isn't the custom everywhere, even on Earth. A Frenchman isn't unhappy if he has free time; he orders another café au lait and lets the saucers pile up. Nor am I fond of work. Oscar, I ruined our evening from laziness, too anxious to avoid having to redo a weary task tomorrow. I will not make that mistake twice."

"Star, that doesn't matter. That's over with."

"I know. The first issue is rarely the key. Nor the second. Nor, sometimes, the twenty-second. Oscar, you are not a gigolo."

"What do you call it? When it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck and acts like a duck, I call it a duck. Call it a bunch of roses. It still quacks."

"No. All this around us—" She waved. "Bed. This beautiful chamber. The food we eat. My clothes and yours. Our lovely pools. The night majordomo on watch against the chance that you or I might demand a singing bird or a ripe melon. Our captive gardens. All we see or touch or use or fancy—and a thousand times as much in distant places, all these you earned with your own strong hands; they are yours, by right."

I snorted. "They are," she insisted. "That was our contract. I promised you great adventure, and greater treasure, and even greater danger. You agreed. You said, 'Princess, you've hired yourself a boy.' " She smiled. "Such a big boy. Darling, I think the dangers were greater than you guessed . . . so it has pleased me, until now, that the treasure is greater than you were likely to have guessed. Please don't be shy about accepting it. You have earned it and more—as much as you are ever willing to accept."

"Uh—Even if you are right, it's too much. I'm drowning in marshmallows!"

"But, Oscar, you don't have to take one bit you don't want. We can live simply. In one room with

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bed folded into wall if it pleases you."

"That's no solution."

"Perhaps you would like bachelor digs, out in town?"

"'Tossing my shoes,' eh?"

She said levelly, "My husband, if your shoes are ever tossed, you must toss them. I jumped over your sword. I shall not jump back."

"Take it easy!" I said. "It was your suggestion. If I took it wrong, I'm sorry. I know you don't go back on your word. But you might be regretting it."

"I am not regretting it. Are *you?*"

"No, Star, no! But—"

"That's a long pause for so short a word," she said gravely. "Will you tell me?"

"Uh . . . that's just it. Why didn't *you* tell *me?*"

"Tell what, Oscar? There are so many things to tell."

"Well, a lot of things. What I was getting into. About you being the Empress of the whole works, in particular . . . before you let me jump over the sword with you."

Her face did not change but tears rolled down her cheeks. "I could answer that you did not ask me—"

"I didn't know what to ask!"

"That is true. I could assert, truthfully, that had you asked I would have answered. I could protest that I did not 'let you' jump over the sword, that you overruled my protests that it was not necessary to offer me the honor of marriage by the laws of your people . . . that I was a wench you could tumble at will. I could point out that I am not an empress, not royal, but a working woman whose job does not permit her even the luxury of being noble. All these are true. But I will not hide behind them; I will meet your question." She slipped into Nevian. "Milford Hero, I feared sorely that if I did not bend to your will, you would leave me!"

"Milady wife, truly did you think that your champion would desert you in your peril?" I went on in English, "Well, that nails it to the barn. You married me because the Egg damned well had to be recovered and Your Wisdom told you that I was necessary to the job—and might bug out. Stupid of me but I'm stubborn." I started to get out of bed.

"Milord love!" She was crying openly.

"Excuse me. Got to find a pair of shoes. See how far I can throw them." I was being nasty as only a man can be who has had his pride wounded.

"Please, Oscar, please! Hear me first."

I heaved a sigh. "Talk ahead."

She grabbed my hand so hard I would have lost fingers had I tried to pull loose. "Hear me out. My beloved, it was not that at all. I knew that you would not give up

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our quest until it was finished or we were dead. I *knew!* Not only had I reports reaching back years before I ever saw you but also we had shared joy and danger and hardship; I knew your mettle. But, had it been needed, I could have bound you with a net of words, persuaded you to agree to betrothal only—until the quest was over. You are a romantic, you would have agreed. But, darling, darling! I *wanted* to marry you . . . bind you to me by *your* rules, so that—" She stopped to sniff back tears. "So that, when you saw all this, and this, and this, and the things you call 'your toys,' you *still* would stay with me. It was not politics, it was *love*—love romantic and unreasoned, love for your own sweet self."

She dropped her face into her hands and I could barely hear her. "But I know so little of love. Love is a butterfly that lights when it listeth, leaves as it chooses; it is never bound with chains. I sinned. I tried to bind you. Unjust I knew it was, cruel to you I now see it to be." Star looked up with crooked smile. "Even Her Wisdom has no wisdom when it comes to being a woman. But, though silly wench I be, I am not too stubborn to know that I have wronged my beloved when my face is rubbed in it. Go, go, get your sword; I will jump back over it and my champion will be free of his silken cage. Go, milord Hero, while my heart is firm."

"Go fetch your own sword, wench. That paddling is long overdue."

Suddenly she grinned, all hoyden. "But, darling, my sword is in Karth-Hokesh. Don't you remember?"

"You can't avoid it this time!" I grabbed her. Star is a handful and slippery, with amazing muscles. But I'm bigger and she didn't fight as hard as she could have. Still I lost skin and picked up bruises before I got her legs pinned and one arm twisted behind her. I gave her a couple of hearty spanks, hard enough to print each finger in pink, then lost interest.

Now tell me, were those words straight from her heart—or was it acting by the smartest woman in twenty universes?

Later, Star said, "I'm glad your chest is not a scratchy rug, like some men, my beautiful."

"I was a pretty baby, too. How many chests have you checked?"

"A random sample. Darling, have you decided to keep me?"

"A while. On good behavior, you understand."

"I'd rather be kept on bad behavior. But—while you're feeling mellow—if you are—I had best tell you another thing—and take my spanking if I must."

"You're too anxious. One a day is maximum, hear me?"

"As you will, sir. Yassuh, Boss

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man. I'll have my sword fetched in the morning and you can spank me with it at your leisure. If you think you can catch me. But I must tell this and get it off my chest."

"There's nothing on your chest. Unless you count—"

"Please! You've been going to our therapists."

"Once a week." The first thing Star had ordered was an examination for me so complete as to make an Army physical seem perfunctory. "The Head Sawbones insists that my wounds aren't healed but I don't believe him; I've never felt better."

"He is stalling, Oscar—by my order. You're healed, I am not unskilled, I was most careful. But—darling, I did this for selfish reasons and now you must tell me if I have been cruel and unjust to you again. I admit I was sneaky. But my intentions were good. However, I know, as the prime lesson of my profession, that good intentions are the source of more folly than all other causes put together."

"Star, what are you prattling about? Women are the source of all folly."

"Yes, dearest. Because they always have good intentions—and can prove it. Men sometimes act from rational self-interest, which is safer. But not often."

"That's because half their ancestors are female. Why have I been keeping doctor's appointments if I don't need them?"

"I didn't say you don't need them. But you may not think so. Oscar, you are far advanced with Long-Life treatments." She eyed me as if ready to parry or retreat.

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"You object? At this stage it can be reversed."

"I hadn't thought about it." I knew that Long-Life was available on Center but knew also that it was rigidly restricted. Anybody could have it—just before emigrating to a sparsely-settled planet. Permanent residents must grow old and die. This was one matter in which one of Star's predecessors had interfered in local government. Center, with disease practically conquered, great prosperity, and lodestone of a myriad peoples, had grown too crowded, especially when Long-Life sent skyward the average age of death.

This stern rule had thinned the crowds. Some people took Long-Life early, went through a Gate and took their chances in wilderness. More waited until that first twinge that brings awareness of death, then decided that they weren't too old for a change. And some sat tight and died when their time came.

I knew that twinge; it had been handed to me by a bolo in a jungle. "I guess I have no objection."

She sighed with relief. "I didn't

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know and should not have slipped it into your coffee. Do I rate a spanking?"

"We'll add it to the list you already rate and give them to you all at once. Probably cripple you. Star, how long is 'Long-Life'?"

"That's hard to answer. Very few who have had it have died in bed. If you live as active a life as I know you will—from your temperament—you are most unlikely to die of old age. Nor of disease."

"And I never grow old?" It takes getting used to.

"Oh, yes, you can grow old. Worse yet, senility stretches in proportion. If you let it. If those around you allow it. However—Darling, how old do I look? Don't tell me with your heart, tell me with your eyes. By Earth standards. Be truthful, I know the answer."

It was ever a joy to look at Star but. I tried to look at her freshly, for hints of autumn—outer corners of eyes, her hands, for tiny changes in skin—hell, not even a stretch mark, yet I knew she had a grandchild.

"Star, when I first saw you, I guessed eighteen. You turned around and I upped the ante a little. Now, looking closely and not giving you any breaks—not over twenty-five. And that is because your features seem mature. When you laugh, you're a teenager; when you wheedle, or look awe-struck, or suddenly delighted with a puppy or kitten or something, you're about twelve. From the chin up, I mean; from the chin down you can't pass for less than eighteen."

"A buxom eighteen," she added. "Twenty-five Earth years—by rates of growth on Earth—is right on the mark I was shooting at. The age when a woman stops growing and starts aging. Oscar, your apparent age under Long-Life is a matter of choice. Take my Uncle Joseph—the one who sometimes calls himself 'Count Cagliostro'. He set himself at thirty-five, because he says that anything younger is a boy. Rufo prefers to look older. He says it gets him respectful treatment, keeps him out of brawls with younger men—and still lets him give a younger man a shock if one does pick a fight because, as you know, Rufo's older age is mostly from chin up."

"Or the shock he can give younger women," I suggested.

"With Rufo one never knows. Dearest, I didn't finish telling you. Part of it is teaching the body to repair itself. Your language lessons here—there hasn't been a one but what a hypnotherapist was waiting to give your body a lesson through your sleeping mind, after your language lesson. Part of apparent age is cosmetic therapy—Rufo need not be bad—but more is controlled by the mind. When you decide what age you like, they can start imprinting it."

"I'll think about it. I don't want

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to look too much older than you."

Star looked delighted. "Thank you, dear! You see how selfish I've been."

"How? I missed that point."

She put a hand over mine. "I didn't want you to grow old—and *die!*—while I stayed young."

I blinked at her. "Gosh, lady, that *was* selfish of you, wasn't it? But you could varnish me and keep me in the bedroom. Like your aunt."

She made a face. "You're a nasty man. She didn't varnish them."

"Star, I haven't seen any of those keepsake corpses around here."

She looked surprised. "But that's on the planet where I was born. This universe, another star. Very pretty place. Didn't I ever say?"

"Star, my darling, mostly you've never said."

"I'm sorry. Oscar, I don't want to hand you surprises. Ask me. Tonight. Anything."

I considered it. One thing I had wondered about, a certain lack. Or perhaps the women of her part of the race had another rhythm. But I had been stopped by the fact that I had married a grandmother—how old? "Star, are you pregnant?"

"Why, no, dear. *Oh!* Do you want me to be? You want us to have children?"

I stumbled, trying to explain that I hadn't been sure it was possible—or maybe she was. Star looked troubled. "I'm going to upset you again. I had best tell it all. Oscar, I was no more brought up to luxury than you were. A pleasant childhood, my people were ranchers. I married young and was a simple mathematics teacher, with a hobby research in conjectural and optional geometries. Magic, I mean. Three children. My husband and I got along well . . . until I was nominated. Not selected, just named for examination and possible training. He knew I was a genetic candidate when he married me—but so many millions are. It didn't seem important.

"He wanted me to refuse. I almost did. But when I accepted, he—well, he 'tossed my shoes.' We do it formally there; he published a notice that I was no longer his wife."

"He did, eh? Mind if I look him up and break his arms?"

"Dear, dear! That was many years ago and far away; he is long dead. It doesn't matter."

"In any case he's dead. Your three kids—one of them is Rufo's father? Or mother?"

"Oh, no! That was later."

"Well?"

Star took a deep breath. "Oscar, I have about fifty children."

That did it. Too many shocks and I guess I showed it, for Star's face reflected deep concern. She

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rushed through the explanation.

When she was named heir, changes were made in her, surgical, biochemical, and endocrinal. Nothing as drastic as spaying and to different ends and by techniques more subtle than ours. But the result was that about two hundred tiny bits of Star—ova alive and latent—were stored near absolute zero.

Some fifty had been quickened, mostly by emperors long dead but "alive" in their stored seed—genetic gambles on getting one or more future emperors. Star had not borne them; an heir's time is too precious. She had never seen most of them; Rufo's father was an exception. She didn't say, but I think Star liked to have a child around to play with and love—until the strenuous first years of her reign and the Quest for the Egg left her no time.

This change had a double purpose: to get some hundreds of starline children from a single mother, and to leave the mother free. By endocrine control of some sort, Star was left free of Eve's rhythm but in all ways young—not pills nor hormone injections; this was permanent. She was simply a healthy woman who never had "bad days." This was not for her convenience but to insure that her judgment as the Great Judge would never be whipsawed by her glands. "This is sensible," she said seriously. "I can remember there used to be days when I would bite the head off my dearest friend for no reason, then burst into tears. One can't be judicial in that sort of storm."

"Uh, did it affect your interest? I mean your desire for—"

She gave me a hearty grin. "What do *you* think?" She added seriously, "The *only* thing that affects my libido—changes it for the worse, I mean—are . . . is? —English has the oddest structure —is-are those pesky imprintings. Sometimes up, sometimes down—and you'll remember one woman whose name we won't mention who affected me so carnivorously that I didn't dare come near you until I had exorcised her black soul! A fresh imprint affects my judgment as well, so I never hear a case until I have digested the latest one. I'll be glad when they're over!"

"So will I."

"Not as glad as *I* will be. But, aside from that, darling, I don't vary much as a female and you know it. Just my usual bawdy self who eats young boys for breakfast and seduces them into jumping over swords."

"How many swords?"

She looked at me sharply. "Since my first husband kicked me out I have not been married until I married *you*, Mr. Gordon. If that is not what you meant, I don't think you should hold against me things that happened

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before you were born. If you want details since then, I'll satisfy your curiosity. Your morbid curiosity, if I may say so."

"You want to boast. Wench, I won't pamper it."

"I do *not* want to boast! I've little to boast about. The Crisis of the Egg left me almost no time in which to be a woman, damn it! Until Oscar the Rooster came along. Thank you, sir."

"And keep a civil tongue in your head."

"Yes, sir. Nice Rooster! But you've led us far from our muttons, dear. If you want children —*yes*, darling! There are about two hundred and thirty eggs left and they belong to *me*. Not to posterity. Not to the dear people, bless their greedy little hearts. Not to those God-playing genetic manipulators. *Me!* It's all I own. All else is *ex officio*. But these are *mine* . . . and if you want them, they are yours, my only dear."

I should have said, *"Yes!"* and kissed her. What I did say was, "Uh, let's not rush it."

Her face fell. "As milord Hero husband pleases."

"Look, don't get Nevian and formal. I mean, well, it takes getting used to. Syringes and things, I suppose, and monkeying by technicians. And, while I realize you don't have time to have a baby yourself—"

I was trying to say that, ever since I got straightened out about the Stork, I had taken for granted the usual setup, and artificial insemination was a dirty trick to play even on a cow—and that this job, subcontracted on both sides—made me think of slots in a Horn & Hardart, or a mail-order suit. But give me time and I would adjust. Just as she had adjusted to those damned imprints—

She gripped my hands. "Darling, you needn't!"

"Needn't what?"

"Be monkeyed with by technicians. And I will *take* time to have your baby. If you don't mind seeing my body get gross and huge—it does, it does, I remember—then happily I will do it. All will be as with other people so far as you are concerned. No syringes. No technicians. Nothing to offend your pride. Oh, I'll have to be worked on. But I'm used to being handled like a prize cow; it means no more than having my hair shampooed."

"Star, you would go through nine months of inconvenience—and maybe die in childbirth—to save me a few moments annoyance?"

"I shall not die. Three children, remember? Normal deliveries, no trouble."

"But, as you pointed out, that was 'many years ago.' "

"No matter."

"Uh, how many years?" ("How old are you, my woman?" The question I never dared ask.)

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She looked upset. "Does it matter, Oscar?"

"Uh, I suppose not. You know more about medicine than I do—"

She said slowly, "You were asking how old I am, were you not?"

I didn't say anything. She waited, then went on, "An old saw from your world says that a woman is as young as she feels. And I feel young and I *am* young and I have zest for life and I can bear a baby—or many babies—in my own belly. But I know!—that your worry is not just that I am too rich and occupy a position not easy for a husband. Yes, I knew that part too well; my first husband rejected me for that. But he was my age. The most cruel and unjust thing I have done is that I *knew* that my age could matter to you—and I kept still. That was why Rufo was so outraged. After you were asleep that night in the cave of the Forest of Dragons he told me so, in biting words. He said he knew I was not above enticing young boys but he never thought that I would sink so low as to trap one into marriage without first telling him. He's never had a high opinion of his old granny, he said, but this time—"

"Shut up, Star!"

"Yes, milord."

"It doesn't make a damn bit of difference!"—and I said it so flatly that I believed it—and do now. "Rufo doesn't know what I think. You are younger than tomorrow's dawn—you always will be. That's the last I want to hear about it!"

"Yes, milord."

"And knock that off, too. Just say, 'Okay, Oscar.' "

"Yes, Oscar! Okay!"

"Better. Unless you're honing for another spanking. And I'm too tired." I changed the subject. "About this other matter—There's no reason to stretch your pretty tummy if other ways are at hand. I'm a country jake, that's all; I'm not used to big city ways. When you suggested that you do it yourself, did you mean that they could put you back together the way you were?"

"No. I would simply be host-mother as well as genetic mother." She smiled and I knew I was making progress. "But saving a tidy sum of that money you don't want to spend. Those healthy, sturdy women who have other people's babies charge high. Four babies, they can retire—ten makes them wealthy."

"I should think they would charge high! Star, I don't object to spending money. I'll concede, if you say so, that I've earned more than I spend, by my work as a professional hero. That's a tough racket, too."

"You've earned it."

"This citified way of having babies—Can you pick it? Boy, or girl?"

"Of course. Male-giving wig-

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glers swim faster, they can be sorted out. That's why Wisdoms are usually men—I was an unplanned candidate. You shall have a son, Oscar."

"Might prefer a girl. I've a weakness for little girls."

"A boy, a girl—or both. Or as many as you want."

"Star, let me study it. Lots of angles—and I don't think as well as you do."

"Pooh!"

"If you don't think better than I do, the cash customers are getting rooked. Mmm, male seed can be stored as easily as eggs?"

"Much easier."

"That's all the answer we need now. I'm not too jumpy about syringes; I've stood in enough Army queues. I'll go to the clinic or whatever it is, then we can settle it slowly. When we decide—" I shrugged. "—mail the postcard and when it goes *clunk!*—we're parents. Or some such. From there on the technicians and those husky girls can handle it."

"Yes, milo—Okay, darling!"

All better. Almost her little girl face. Certainly her sixteen-year-old face, with new party dress and boys a shivery, delightful danger. "Star, you said earlier that it was often not the second issue but even the twenty-second that matters."

"Yes."

"I know what's wrong with me. I can tell you—and maybe Her Wisdom knows the answer."

She blinked. "If you can tell me, sweetheart—Her Wisdom will solve it, even if I have to tear the place down and put it back up differently—from here to the next galaxy—or I'll go out of the Wisdom business!"

"That sounds more like my Lucky Star. All right, it's not that I'm a gigolo. I've earned my coffee and cakes, at least; the Soul-Eater did damn near eat my soul, he knew its exact shape—he . . . it—it knew things I had long forgotten. It was rough and the pay ought to be high. It's not your age, dearest. Who cares how old Helen of Troy is? You're the right age forever—can a man be luckier? I'm not jealous of your position; I wouldn't want it with chocolate icing. I'm not jealous of the men in your life—the lucky stiffs! Not even now, as long as I don't stumble over them getting to the bathroom."

"There are no other men in my life now, milord husband."

"I had no reason to think so. But there is always next week, and even you can't have a Sight about *that* my beloved. You've taught me that marriage is not a form of death—and you obviously aren't dead, you lively wench."

"Perhaps not a Sight," she admitted. "But a feeling."

"I won't bet on it. I've read the Kinsey Report."

"What report?"

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"He disproved the Mermaid theory. About married women. Forget it. Hypothetical question: If Jocko visited Center, would you still have the same feeling? We would have to invite him to sleep here."

"The Doral will never leave Nevia."

"Don't blame him, Nevia is wonderful. I said 'If—' If he does, will you offer him 'roof, table, and bed'?"

"That," she said firmly, "is *your* decision, milord."

"Rephrase it: Will you expect *me* to humiliate Jock by not returning his hospitality? Gallant old Jocko, who let us live when he was entitled to kill us? Whose bounty—arrows and many things, including a new medic's kit—kept us alive and let us win back the Egg?"

"By Nevian customs of roof and table and bed," she insisted, "the *husband* decides, milord husband."

"We aren't in Nevia and here a wife has a mind of her own. You're dodging, wench."

She grinned naughtily. "Does that 'if' of yours include Muri? And Letva? They're his favorites, he wouldn't travel without them. And how about little what's-her-name?—the nymphet?"

"I give up. I was just trying to prove that jumping over a sword does not turn a lively wench into a nun."

"I am aware of it, my Hero," she said levelly. "All I can say is that I intend that *this* wench shall never give her Hero a moment's unease—and my intentions are usually carried out. I am not 'Her Wisdom' for nothing."

"Fair enough. I never thought you would cause me that sort of unease. I was trying to show that the task may not be too difficult. Damn it, we've wandered off. Here's my real problem. I'm not good for anything. I'm worthless."

"Why, my dearest! You're good for *me*."

"But not for myself. Star, gigolo or not, I can't be a pet poodle. Not even yours. Look, you've got a job. It keeps you busy and it's important. But me? There is nothing for me to do, nothing *at all!*—nothing better than designing bad jewelry. You know what I am? A hero by trade, so you told me; you recruited me. Now I'm retired. Do you know anything in all twenty universes more useless than a *retired* hero?"

She mentioned a couple. I said, "You're stalling. Anyhow they break up the blankness of the male chest. I'm serious, Star. This *is* the issue that has made me unfit to live with. Darling, I'm asking you to put your whole mind on it—and all those ghostly helpers. Treat it the way you treat an Imperial problem. Forget I'm your husband. Consider my total situation, all you know about me—and

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tell me what I can do with hands and head and time that is worth doing. *Me,* being what I am."

She held still for long minutes, her face in that professional calm she had worn the times I had audited her work. "You are right," she said at last. "There is nothing worth your powers on this planet."

"Then what *do* I do?"

She said tonelessly, 'You must leave."

"Huh?"

"You think I like the answer, my husband? Do you think I like most answers I must give? But you asked me to consider it professionally. I obeyed. That is the answer. You must leave this planet—and me."

"So my shoes get tossed anyhow?"

"Be not bitter, milord. That *is* the answer. I can evade and be womanish only in my private life; I cannot refuse to think if I agree to do so as 'Her Wisdom.' You must leave me. But, no, no, no, your shoes are not tossed! You *will* leave, because you must. Not because I wish it." Her face stayed calm but tears streamed again. "One cannot ride a cat . . . nor hurry a snail . . . nor teach a snake to fly. Nor make a poodle of a Hero. I knew it, I refused to look at it. You will do what you must do. But your shoes will remain ever by my bed, *I* am not sending you away!" She blinked back tears. "I cannot lie to you, even by silence. I will not say that no other shoes will rest here . . . if you are gone a long time. I have been lonely. There are no words to say how lonely this job is. When you do . . . I shall be lonelier than ever. But you will find your shoes here when you return."

"When I return? You have a Sight?"

"No, milord Hero. I have only a feeling . . . that if you live . . . you will return. Perhaps many times. But Heroes do not die in bed. Not even this one." She blinked and tears stopped and her voice was steady. "Now, milord husband, if it please you, shall we dim the lights and rest?"

We did and she put her head on my shoulder and did not cry. But we did not sleep. After an aching time I said, "Star, do you hear what I hear?"

She raised her head. "I hear nothing."

"The City. Can't you hear it? People. Machines. Even thoughts so thick your bones feel it and your ear almost catches it."

"Yes. I know that sound."

"Star, do you *like* it here?"

"No. It was never necessary that I like it."

"Look, damn it! You said that I would leave. *Come with me!*"

"Oh, Oscar!"

"What do you owe them? Isn't recovering the Egg enough? Let them take a new victim. Come walk the Glory Road with me

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again! There must be work in my line somewhere."

"There is always work for Heroes."

"Okay, we set up in business, you and I. Heroing isn't a bad job. The meals are irregular and the pay uncertain—but it's never dull. We'll run ads: 'Gordon & Gordon, Heroing Done Reasonable. No job too large, no job too small. Dragons exterminated by contract, satisfaction guaranteed or no pay. Free estimates on other work. Questing, maiden-rescuing, golden fleece located night or day."

I was trying to jolly her but Star doesn't jolly. She answered in sober earnest, "Oscar, if I am to retire, I should train my heir first. True, no one can order me to do anything—but I have a duty to train my replacement."

"How long will that take?"

"Not long. Thirty years, about."

"Thirty years!"

"I could force it to twenty-five, I think."

I sighed. "Star, do you know how old I am?"

"Yes. Not yet twenty-five. ***But you will get no older!***"

"But right now I'm still that age. That's all the time there has *ever* been for *me*. Twenty-five years as a pet poodle and I won't be a hero, nor anything. I'll be out of my silly mind."

She thought about it. "Yes. That is true."

She turned over, we made a spoon and pretended to sleep.

Later I felt her shoulders shaking and knew that she was sobbing. "Star?"

She didn't turn her head. All I heard was a choking voice, "Oh, my dear, my very dear! If I were even a *hundred* years younger!"

XX

I LET THE PRECIOUS, USELESS gems dribble through my fingers, listlessly pushed them aside. If *I* were only a hundred years *older*—

But Star was right. She could not leave her post without relief. Her notion of proper relief, not mine nor anyone's else. And I couldn't stay in this upholstered jail much longer without beating my head on the bars.

Yet both of us wanted to stay together.

The real nasty hell of it was that I knew—just as she knew—that each of us would forget. Some, anyhow. Enough so that there would be other shoes, other men, and she would laugh again.

And so would I— She had seen that and had gravely, gently, with subtle consideration for another's feelings, told me indirectly that I need not feel guilty when next I courted some other girl, in some other land, somewhere.

Then why did I feel like a heel?

How did I get trapped with no way to turn without being forced to choose between hurting my be-

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loved and going clean off my rocker?

I read somewhere about a man who lived on a high mountain, because of asthma, the choking, killing kind, while his wife lived on the coast below him, because of heart trouble that could not stand altitude. Sometimes they looked at each other through telescopes.

In the morning there had been no talk of Star's retiring. The unstated quid-pro-quo was that, if she planned to retire, I would hang around (*thirty years!*) until she did. Her Wisdom had concluded that I could not, and did not speak of it. We had a luxurious breakfast and were cheerful, each with his secret thoughts.

Nor were children mentioned. Oh, I would find that clinic, do what was needed. If she wanted to mix her star line with my common blood, she could, tomorrow or a hundred years hence. Or smile tenderly and have it cleaned out with the rest of the trash. None of *my* people had even been mayor of Podunk and a plough horse isn't groomed for the Irish Sweepstakes. If Star put a child together from our genes, it would be sentiment, a living valentine—a younger poodle she could pet before she let it run free. But sentiment only, as sticky if not as morbid as that of her aunt with the dead husbands, for the Imperium could not use my bend sinister.

I looked up at my sword, hanging opposite me. I hadn't touched it since the party, long past, when Star chose to dress for the Glory Road. I took it down, buckled it on and drew it—felt that surge of liveness and had a sudden vision of a long road and a castle on a hill.

What does a champion owe his lady when the quest is done?

Quit dodging, Gordon! What does a *husband* owe his *wife*? This very sword—"Jump Rogue and Princess leap, My wife art thou and mine to *keep*." "—for richer, for poorer, for better, for worse . . . to love and to cherish till death do us part." *That* was what I meant by that doggerel and Star had known it and I had known it and knew it now.

When we vowed, it had seemed likely that we would be parted by death that same day. But that didn't reduce the vow nor the deepness with which I had meant it. I hadn't jumped the sword to catch a tumble on the grass before I died; I could have had that free. No, I had wanted "—to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, till death do us part"!

Star had kept her vow to the letter. Why did *I* have itchy feet?

Scratch a hero and find a bum.

And a *retired* hero was as silly as those out-of-work kings that clutter Europe.

I slammed out of our "flat," wearing sword and not giving a damn about stares, apported to our

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therapists, found where I should go, went there, did what was necessary, told the boss biotechnician that Her Wisdom must be told, and jumped down his throat when he asked questions.

Then back to the nearest apport booth and hesitated—I needed companionship the way an Alcoholics-Anonymous needs his hand held. But I had no intimates, just hundreds of acquaintances. It isn't easy for the Empress's consort to have friends.

Rufo it had to be. But in all the months I had been on Center I had never been in Rufo's home. Center does not practice the barbarous custom of dropping in on people and I had seen Rufo only at the Residence, or on parties; Rufo had never invited me to his home. No, no coldness there; we saw him often, but always he had come to us.

I looked for him in apport listings—no luck. Then as little with see-speak lists. I called the Residence, got the communication officer. He said that "Rufo" was not a surname and tried to brush me off. I said, "Hold it, you overpaid clerk! Switch me off and you'll be in charge of smoke signals in Timbuctu an hour from now. Now listen. This bloke is elderly, baldheaded, one of his names is 'Rufo' I think, and he is a distinguished comparative culturologist. *And* he is a grandson of Her Wisdom. I think you know who he is and have been dragging your feet from bureaucratic arrogance. You have five minutes. Then I talk to Her Wisdom and ask *her*, while *you* pack!"

("Stop! Danger you! Other old bald Rufo(?) top comp-culturist. Wisdom egg-sperm-egg. Five-minutes. Liar and//or fool. Wisdom? Catastrophe!")

In less than five minutes Rufo's image filled the tank. "Well!" he said. "I wondered who had enough weight to crash my shut-off."

"Rufo, may I come see you?"

His scalp wrinkled. "Mice in the pantry, son? Your face reminds me of the time my uncle—"

"Please, Rufo!"

"Yes, son," he said gently. "I'll send the dancing girls home. Or shall I keep them?"

"I don't care. How do I find you?"

He told me, I punched his code, added my charge number, and I was there, a thousand miles around the horizon. Rufo's place was a mansion as lavish as Jocko's and thousands of years more sophisticated. I gathered an impression that Rufo had the biggest household on Center, all female. I was wrong. But all female servants, visitors, cousins, daughters, made themselves a reception committee —to look at Her Wisdom's bedmate. Rufo shooed them away and took me to his study. A dancing girl (evidently a secretary) was fussing over papers and tapes. Rufo

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slapped her fanny out, gave me a comfortable chair, a drink, put cigarettes near me, sat down and said nothing.

Smoking isn't popular on Center, what they use as tobacco is the reason. I picked up a cigarette. "'Chesterfields!' Good God!"

"Have 'em smuggled," he said. "But they don't make anything like Sweet Caps anymore. Bridge sweepings and chopped hay."

I hadn't smoked in months. But Star had told me that cancer and such I could now forget. So I lit it —and coughed like a Nevian dragon. Vice requires constant practice.

"'What news on the Rialto?'" Rufo inquired. He glanced at my sword.

"Oh, nothing." Having interrupted Rufo's work, I now shied at baring my domestic troubles.

Rufo sat and smoked and waited. I needed to say something and the American cigarette reminded me of an incident, one that had added to my unstable condition. At a party a week earlier, I had met a man thirty-five in appearance, smooth, polite, but with that supercilious air that says: "Your fly is unzipped, old man, but I'm too urbane to mention it."

But I had been delighted to meet him, he had spoken *English!*

I had thought that Star, Rufo, and myself were the only ones on Center who spoke English. We often spoke it, Star on my account, Rufo because he liked to practice. He spoke Cockney like a costermonger, Bostonese like Beacon Hill, Aussie like a kangaroo; Rufo knew all English languages.

This chap spoke good General American. "Nebbi is the name," he said, shaking hands where no one shakes hands, "and you're Gordon, I know. Delighted to meet you."

"Me, too," I agreed. "It's a surprise and a pleasure to hear my own language."

"Professional knowledge, my dear chap. Comparative culturologist, linguisto-historo-political. You're American, I know. Let me place it—Deep South, not born there. Possibly New England. Overlaid with displaced Middle Western, California perhaps. Basic speech, lower-middle class, mixed."

The smooth oaf was good. Mother and I lived in Boston while my father was away, 1942-45. I'll never forget those winters; I wore overshoes from November to April. I had lived Deep South, Georgia and Florida, and in California at La Jolla during the Korean unWar and, later, in college. "Lower-middle class"? Mother had not thought so.

"Near enough," I agreed. "I know one of your colleagues."

"I know whom you mean, 'the Mad Scientist.' Wonderfully wacky theories. But tell me: How were things when you left? Especially, how is the United States getting

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along with its Noble Experiment?"

" 'Noble Experiment?' " I had to think; Prohibition was gone before I was born. "Oh, that was repealed."

"Really? I must go back for a field trip. What have you now? A king? I could see that your country was headed that way but I did not expect it so soon."

"Oh, no," I said. "I was talking about Prohibition."

"Oh, that. Symptomatic but not basic. I was speaking of the amusing notion of chatter rule. 'Democracy.' A curious delusion—as if adding zeros could produce a sum. But it was tried in your tribal land on a mammoth scale. Before you were born, no doubt. I thought you meant that even the corpse had been swept away." He smiled. "Then they still have elections and all that?"

"The last time I looked, yes."

"Oh, wonderful. Fantastic, simply fantastic. Well, we must get together, I want to quiz you. I've been studying your planet a long time—the most amazing pathologies in the explored complex. So long. Don't take any wooden nickels, as your tribesmen say."

I told Rufo about it. "Rufe, I know I come from a barbarous planet. But does that excuse his rudeness? Or was it rudeness? I haven't really got the hang of good manners here."

Rufo frowned. "It is bad manners anywhere to sneer at a person's birthplace, tribe, or customs. A man does it at his own risk. If you kill him, nothing will happen to you. It might embarrass Her Wisdom a little. If She can be embarrassed."

"I won't kill him, it's not that important."

"Then forget it. Nebbi is a snob. He knows a little, understands nothing, and thinks the universes would be better if he had designed them. Ignore him."

"I will. It was just—look, Rufo, my country isn't perfect. But I don't enjoy hearing it from a stranger."

"Who does? I like your country, it has flavor. But—I'm not a stranger and this is not a sneer. Nebbi was right."

"Huh?"

"Except that he sees only the surface. Democracy can't work. Mathematicians, peasants, and animals, that's all there is—so democracy, a theory based on the assumption that mathematicians and peasants are equal, can never work. Wisdom is not additive; its maximum is that of the wisest man in a given group.

"But a democratic *form* of government is okay, as long as it doesn't work. Any social organization does well enough if it isn't rigid. The framework doesn't matter as long as there is enough looseness to permit that one man in a multitude to display his genius. Most so-called social scien-

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tists seem to think that organization is everything. It is almost nothing—except when it is a straitjacket. It is the incidence of heroes that counts, not the pattern of zeros."

He added, "Your country has a system free enough to let its heroes work at their trade. It should last a long time—unless its looseness is destroyed from inside."

"I hope you're right."

"I *am* right. This subject I know and I'm not stupid, as Nebbi thinks. He's right about the futility of 'adding zeros'—but he doesn't realize that he is a zero."

I grinned. "No point in letting a zero get my goat."

"None. Especially as you are not. Wherever you go, you will make yourself felt, you won't be one of the herd. I respect you, and I don't respect many. Never people as a whole, I could never be a democrat at heart. To claim to 'respect' and even to 'love' the great mass with their yaps at one end and smelly feet at the other requires the fatuous, uncritical, saccharine, blind, sentimental slobbishness found in some nursery supervisors, most spaniel dogs, and all missionaries. It isn't a political system, it's a disease. But be of good cheer; your American politicians are immune to this disease . . . and your customs allow the non-zero elbow room."

Rufo glanced at my sword again. "Old friend, you didn't come here to bitch about Nebbi."

"No." I looked down at that keen blade. "I fetched this to shave you, Rufo."

"Eh?"

"I promised I would shave your corpse. I owe it to you for the slick job you did on me. So here I am, to shave the barber."

He said slowly, "But I'm not yet a corpse." He did not move. But his eyes did, estimating distance between us. Rufo wasn't counting on my being "chivalrous"; he had lived too long.

"Oh, that can be arranged," I said cheerfully, "unless I get straight answers from you."

He relaxed a touch. "I'll try, Oscar."

"More than try, please. You're my last chance. Rufo, this must be private. Even from Star."

"Under the Rose. My word on it."

"With your fingers crossed, no doubt. But don't risk it, I'm serious. And straight answers, I need them. I want advice about my marriage."

He looked glum. "And I meant to go out today. Instead I worked. Oscar, I would rather criticize a woman's first born, or even her taste in hats. Much safer to teach a shark to bite. What if I refuse?"

"Then I shave you!"

"You would, you heavy-handed headsman!" He frowned. "You don't want answers, you want a shoulder to cry on."

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"Maybe that, too. But I do want straight answers, not the lies you can tell in your sleep."

"So I lose either way. Telling a man the truth about his marriage is suicide. I think I'll sit tight and see if you have the heart to cut me down in cold blood."

"Oh, Rufo, I'll put my sword under your lock and key if you like. You know I would never draw against *you*."

"I know no such thing," he said querulously. "There's always that first time. Scoundrels are predictable, but you're a man of honor and that frightens me. Can't we handle this over the see-speak?"

"Come off it, Rufo. I've nobody else to turn to. I want you to speak frankly. I know that a marriage counselor has to lay it on the line, pull no punches. For the sake of blood we've lost together I ask you to advise me. And frankly, of course!"

" 'Of course,' is it? The last time I risked it you were for cutting the tongue out of me." He looked at me moodily. "But I was ever a fool where friendship speaks. Hear, I'll dicker ye a fair dicker. You talk, I'll listen . . . and if it should come about that you're taking so long that my tired old kidneys complain and I'm forced to leave your welcome company for a moment . . . why, then you'll misunderstand and go away in a huff and we'll say no more about it. Eh?"

"Okay."

"The Chair recognizes you. Proceed."

So I talked. I talked out my dilemma and frustration, sparing neither self nor Star (it was for her sake, too, and it wasn't necessary to speak of our most private matters; those, at least, were dandy). But I told our quarrels and many matters best kept in the family, I *had* to.

Rufo listened. Presently he stood up and paced, looking troubled. Once he tut-tutted over the men Star had brought home. "She shouldn't have called her maids in. But do forget it, lad *She* never remembers that men are shy, whereas females merely have customs. Allow Her this."

Later he said, "No need to be jealous of Jocko, son. He drives a tack with a sledgehammer."

"I'm not jealous."

"That's what Menelaus said. But leave room for give and take. Every marriage needs it."

Finally I ran down, having told him Star's prediction that I would leave. "I'm not blaming her for anything and talking about it has straightened me out. I can sweat it out now, behave myself, and be a good husband. She does make terrible sacrifices to do her job—and the least I can do is make it easier. She's so gentle and good."

Rufo stopped, some distance away with his back to his desk. "You think so?"

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"I know so."

"She's an old bag!"

I was out of my chair and at him at once. I didn't draw. Didn't think of it, wouldn't have anyhow. I wanted to get my hands on him and punish him for talking that way about my beloved.

He bounced over that desk like a ball and by the time I covered the length of the room, Rufo was behind it, one hand in a drawer.

"Naughty, naughty," he said. "Oscar, I don't *want* to shave you."

"Come out and fight like a man!"

"Never, old friend. One step closer and you're dog meat. All your fine promises, your pleadings. 'Pull no punches' you said. 'Lay it on the line' you said. 'Speak frankly' you said. Sit down in that chair."

"'Speaking frankly' doesn't mean being insulting!"

"Who's to judge? Can I submit my remarks for approval before I make them? Don't compound your broken promises with childish illogic. And would you force me to buy a new rug? I never keep one I've killed a friend on; the stains make me gloomy. Sit down in that chair."

I sat down.

"Now," said Rufo, staying where he was, "you will listen while *I* talk. Or perhaps you will get up and walk out. In which case I might be so pleased to see the last of your ugly face that that might be that. Or I might be so annoyed at being interrupted that you would drop dead in the doorway, for I've much pent up and ready to spill over. Suit yourself.

"I said," he went on, "that my grandmother is an old bag. I said it brutally, to discharge your tension—and now you're not likely to take too much offense at many offensive things I still must say. She's old, you know that, though no doubt you find it easy to forget, mostly. I forget it myself, mostly, even though She was old when I was a babe making messes on the floor and crowing at the dear sight of Her. Bag, She is, and you know it. I could have said 'experienced woman' but I had to rap your teeth with it; you've been dodging it even while you've been telling me how well you know it—and how you don't care. Granny is an old bag, we start from there.

"And why should *She* be anything else? Tell yourself the answer. You're not a fool, you're merely young. Ordinarily She has but two possible pleasures and the other She can't indulge."

"What's the other one?"

"Handing down bad decisions through sadistic spite, that's the one She dare not indulge. So let us be thankful that Her body has built into it this harmless safety valve, else we would all suffer grievously before somebody man-

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aged to kill Her. Lad, dear lad, can you dream how mortal tired She must be of most things? Your own zest soured in only months. Think what it must be to hear the same old weary mistakes year after year with nothing to hope for but a clever assassin. Then be thankful that She still pleasures in one innocent pleasure. So She's an old bag and I mean no disrespect; I salute a beneficent balance between two things She must be to do her job.

"Nor did She stop being what She is by reciting a silly rhyme with you one bright day on a hilltop. You think She has taken a vacation from it since, sticking to you only. Possibly She has, if you have quoted Her exactly and I read the words rightly; She always tells the truth.

"But never *all* the truth—who can?—and She is the most skillful liar by telling the truth you'll ever meet. I misdoubt your memory missed some innocent-sounding word that gave an escape yet saved your feelings.

"If so, why should *She* do more than save your feelings? She's fond of you, that's clear—but must She be fanatic about it? All Her training, Her special bent, is to avoid fanaticism always, find practical answers. Even though She may not have mixed up the shoes, as yet, if you stay on a week or a year or twenty and time comes when She *wants* to, She can find ways, not lie to you in words—and hurt Her conscience not at all because She hasn't any. Just Wisdom, utterly pragmatic."

Rufo cleared his throat. "No refutation and counterpoint and contrariwise. I like my grandmother and love Her as much as my meager nature permits and respect Her right down to Her sneaky soul—and I'll kill you or anyone who gets in Her way or causes Her unhappiness—and only part of this is that She has handed on to me a shadow of Her own self so that I understand Her. If She is spared assassin's knife or blast or poison long enough, She'll go down in history as 'The Great.' But you spoke of Her 'terrible sacrifices.' Ridiculous! She *likes* being 'Her Wisdom,' the Hub around which all worlds turn. Nor do I believe that She would give it up for you or fifty better. Again, She didn't lie, as you've told it—She said *'if'* . . . knowing that much can happen in thirty years, or twenty-five, among which is the near certainty that you wouldn't stay that long. A swindle.

"But that's the least of swindles She's put over on you. She conned you from the moment you first saw Her and long before. She cheated both ways from the ace, forced you to pick the shell with the pea, sent you like any mark anxious for the best of it, cooled you off when you started to suspect, herded you back into line and to your planned

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fate—and made you like it. *She's* never fussy about methods and would con the Virgin Mary and make a pact with the Old One all in one breath, did it suit Her purpose. Oh, you got paid, yes, and good measure to boot; there's nothing small about *Her*. But it's time you knew you were conned. Mind you, I'm not criticizing *Her,* I'm applauding—and I helped . . . save for one queasy moment when I felt sorry for the victim. But you were so conned you wouldn't listen, thank any saints who did. I lost my nerve for a bit, thinking that you were going to a sticky death with your innocent eyes wide. But *She* was smarter than I am, She always has been.

"Now! I like Her. I respect Her. I admire Her. I even love Her a bit. *All* of Her, not just Her pretty aspects but also all the impurities that make Her steel as hard as it *must* be. How about *you,* sir? What's *your* feeling about Her *now* . . . knowing She conned you, knowing what She is?"

I was still sitting. My drink was by me, untouched all this long harangue.

I took it and stood up. "Here's to the grandest old bag in twenty universes!"

Rufo bounced over the desk again, grabbed his glass. 'Say that loud and often! And to Her, She'd love it! May She be blessed by God, Whoever He is, and kept safe. We'll never see another like *Her,* more's the pity!—for we need them by the gross!"

We tossed it down and smashed our glasses. Rufo fetched fresh ones, poured, settled in his chair, and said, "Now for serious drinking. Did I ever tell you about the time my—"

"You did. Rufo, I want to know about this swindle."

"Such as?"

"Well, I can see much of it. Take that first time we flew—"

He shuddered. "Let's not."

"I never wondered then. But, since Star can do this, we could have skipped Igli, the Horned Ghosts, the marsh, the time wasted with Jocko—"

"Wasted?"

"For her purpose. And the rats and hogs and possibly the dragons. Flown directly from that first Gate to the second. Right?"

He shook his head. "Wrong."

"I don't see it."

"Assuming that She could fly us that far, a question I hope never to settle, She could have flown us to the Gate She preferred. What would you have done then? If popped almost directly from Nice to Karth-Hokesh? Charged out and fought like a wolverine, as you did? Or said, 'Miss, you've made a mistake. Show me the exit from this Fun House—I'm not laughing.' "

"Well—I wouldn't have bugged out."

"But would you have *won?*

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Would you have been at that keen edge of readiness it took?"

"I see. Those first rounds were live-ammo exercises in my training. Or was it live ammo? Was all that first part swindle? Maybe with hypnotism, to make it feel right? God knows she's expert. No danger till we reached the Black Tower?"

He shuddered again. "No, no! Oscar, *any* of that could have killed us. I never fought harder in my life, nor was ever more frightened. *None* of it could be skipped. I don't understand all Her reasons, I'm not Her Wisdom. But She would never risk *Herself* unless necessary. She would sacrifice ten million brave men, were it needed, as the cheaper price. She knows what She's worth. But She fought beside us with all She has —you *saw!* Because it had to be."

"I still don't understand all of it."

"Nor will you. Nor will I. She would have sent you in alone, had it been possible. And at that last supreme danger, that thing called 'Eater of Souls' because it had done just that to many braves before you . . . had you lost to it, She and I would have tried to fight our way out—I was ready, any moment; I couldn't tell you—and if we had escaped—unlikely —She would have shed no tears for you. Or not many. Then worked another twenty or thirty or a hundred years to find and con and train another champion—and fought just as hard by *his* side. She has courage, that cabbage. She knew how thin our chances were; you didn't. Did *She* flinch?"

"No."

"But you were the key, first to be found, then ground to fit. You yourself *act,* you're never a puppet, or you could never have won. *She* was the only one who could nudge and wheedle such a man and place him where he *would* act; no lesser person than *She* could handle the scale of hero *She* needed. So She searched until She found him . . . and honed him fine. Tell me, why did you take up the sword? It's not common in America."

"What?" I had to think. Reading *King Arthur* and *The Three Musketeers,* and Burroughs' wonderful Mars stories—But every kid does that. "When we moved to Florida, I was a Scout. The Scoutmaster was a Frenchman, taught high school. He started some of us kids. I liked it, it was something I did well. Then in college—"

"Ever wonder why that immigrant got that job in that town? And volunteered for Scout work? Or why your college had a fencing team when many don't? No matter, if you had gone elsewhere, there would have been fencing in a YMCA or something. Didn't you have more combat than most of your category?"

"Hell, yes!"

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"Could have been killed anytime, too—and *She* would have turned to another candidate already being honed. Son, I don't know how you were selected, nor how you were converted from a young punk into the hero you potentially were. Not my job. Mine was simpler—just more dangerous—your groom and your 'eyes-behind.' Look around. Fancy quarters for a servant, eh?"

"Well, yes. I had almost forgotten that you were supposed to be my groom."

"'Supposed,' hell! I *was*. I went three times to Nevia as *Her* servant, training for it. Jocko doesn't know to this day. If I went back, I would be welcome, I think. But only in the kitchen."

"But *why?* That part seems silly."

"Was it? When we snared you, your ego was in feeble shape; it had to be built up—and calling you 'Boss' and serving your meals while I stood and you sat, with *Her*, was part of it." He gnawed a knuckle and looked annoyed. "I still think She witched your first two arrows. Someday I'd like a return match—with *Her* not around."

"I may fool you. I've been practicing."

"Well, forget it. We got the Egg, that's the important thing. And here's this bottle and that's important, too." He poured again. "Will that be all, 'Boss?' "

"Damn you, Rufo! Yes, you sweet old scoundrel. You've straightened me out. Or conned me again, I don't know which."

"No con, Oscar, by the blood we've shed. I've told the truth as straight as I know it, though it hurt me. I didn't want to, you're my friend. Walking that rocky road with you I shall treasure all the days of my life."

"Uh . . . yes. Me, too. All of it."

"Then why are you frowning?"

"Rufo, I understand her now—as well as an ordinary person can—and respect her utterly . . . and love her more than ever. But I can't be anybody's fancy man. Not even hers."

"I'm glad I didn't have to say that. Yes. She's right. She's always right, damn Her! You must leave. For both of you. Oh, *She* wouldn't be hurt too much but staying would ruin you, in time. Destroy you, if you're stubborn."

"I had better get back—and toss my shoes." I felt better, as if I had told the surgeon: *Go ahead. Amputate.*

"Don't do that!"

"What?"

"Why should you? No need for anything final. If a marriage is to last a long time—and yours might, even a very long time—then holidays should be long, too. And off the leash, son, with no date to report back and no promises. She knows that knights errant spend

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their nights erring, She expects it. It has always been so, un droit de la vocation—and necessary. They just don't mention it in kiddies' stories where you come from. So go see what's stirring in your line of work elsewhere and don't worry. Come back in four or forty years or something, you'll be welcome. Heroes always sit at the first table, it's their right. And they come and go as they please, and that's their right, too. On a smaller scale, you're something like *Her*."

"High compliment!"

"On a 'smaller scale,' I said. Mmm, Oscar, part of your trouble is a need to go home. Your birthing land. To regain your perspective and find out who you are. All travelers feel this, I feel it myself from time to time. When the feeling comes, I pamper it."

"I hadn't realized I was homesick. Maybe I am."

"Maybe *She* realized it. Maybe She nudged you. Myself, I make it a rule to give any wife of mine a vacation from me whenever her face looks too familiar—for mine must be even more so to her, looking as I do. Why not, lad? Going back to Earth isn't the same as dying. I'm going there soon, that's why I'm clearing up this paper work. Happens we might be there the same time . . . and get together for a drink or ten and some laughs and stories. And pinch the waitress and see what she says. Why not?"

XXI

OKAY, HERE I AM.

I didn't leave that week but soon. Star and I spent a tearful, glorious night before I left and she cried as she kissed me "Au 'voir" (not "Goodbye"). But I knew her tears would dry once I was out of sight; she knew that I knew and I knew she preferred it so, and so did I. Even though I cried, too.

Pan American isn't as slick as the commercial Gates; I was bunged through in three fast changes and no hocus-pocus. A girl said "Places, please"—then *whambo!*

I came out on Earth, dressed in a London suit, passport and papers in pocket. the Lady Vivamus in a kit that did not look like a sword case, and in other pockets drafts exchangeable for much gold, for I found that I didn't mind accepting a hero's fee. I arrived near Zurich, I don't know the address; the Gate service sees to that. Instead, I had ways to send messages.

Shortly those drafts became numbered accounts in three Swiss banks, handled by a lawyer I had been told to see. I bought travelers' cheques several places and some I mailed ahead and some I carried, for I had no intention of paying Uncle Sugar 91%.

You lose track of time on a different day and calendar; there was a week or two left on that free ride

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home my orders called for. It seemed smart to take it—less conspicuous. So I did—an old four-engine transport, Prestwick to Gander to New York.

Streets looked dirtier, buildings not as tall—and headlines worse than ever. I quit reading newspapers, didn't stay long; California I thought of as "home." I phoned Mother; she was reproachful about my not having written and I promised to visit Alaska as soon as I could. How were they all? (I had in mind that my half brothers and sisters might need college help someday.)

They weren't hurting. My stepfather was on flight orders and had made permanent grade. I asked her to forward any mail to my aunt.

California looked better than New York. But it wasn't Nevia. Not even Center. It was more crowded than I remembered. All you can say for California towns is that they aren't as bad as other places. I visited my aunt and uncle because they had been good to me and I was thinking of using some of that gold in Switzerland to buy him free from his first wife. But she had died and they were talking about a swimming pool.

So I kept quiet. I had been almost ruined by too much money, it had grown me up a bit. I followed the rule of Their Wisdoms: Leave well enough alone.

The campus felt smaller and the students looked so *young*. Reciprocal, I guess. I was coming out of the malt shop across from Administration when two Letter sweaters came in, shoving me aside. The second said, "Watch it, Dad!"

I let him live.

Football had been re-emphasized, new coach, new dressing rooms, stands painted, talk about a stadium. The coach knew who I was; he knew the records and was out to make a name. "You're coming back, aren't you?" I told him I didn't think so.

"Nonsense!" he said. "Gotta get that old sheepskin! Silliest thing on Earth to let your hitch in the Army stop you. Now look—" His voice dropped.

No nonsense about "sweeping the gym," stuff the Conference didn't like. But a boy could live with a family—and one could be found. If he paid his fees in cash, who cared? Quiet as an undertaker—"That leaves your G.I. benefits for pocket money."

"I don't have any."

"Man, don't you read the papers?" He had it on file: While I was gone, that unWar had been made eligible for G.I. benefits.

I promised to think it over.

But I had no such intention. I had indeed decided to finish my engineering degree, I like to finish things. But not there.

That evening I heard from Joan, the girl who had given me such a fine sendoff, then "Dear-Johnned" me. I intended to look

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her up, call on her and her husband; I just hadn't found out her married name yet. But she ran across my aunt, shopping, and phoned me. "Easy!" she said and sounded delighted.

"Who—Wait a minute. *Joan!*"

I must come to dinner that very night. I told her "Fine," and that I was looking forward to meeting the lucky galoot she had married.

Joan looked sweet as ever and gave me a hearty arms-around-my-neck smack, a welcome-home kiss, sisterly but good. Then I met the kids, one crib size and the other toddling.

Her husband was in L.A.

I should have reached for my hat. But it was all right think nothing of it Jim had phoned after she talked to me to say that he had to stay over one more night and *of course* it was all right for me to take her out to dinner he had seen me play football and maybe I would like to bowl tomorrow night she hadn't been able to get a baby sitter but her sister and brother-in-law were stopping in for drinks couldn't stay for dinner they were tied up after all dear it isn't like we hadn't known each other a long time oh you do too remember my sister there they are stopping out in front and I don't have the children in bed.

Her sister and brother-in-law stayed for one drink; Joan and her sister put the kids to bed while the brother-in-law sat with me and asked how things were in Europe he understood I was just back and then he told me how things were in Europe and what should be done about them. "You know, Mr. Jordan," he told me, tapping my knee, "a man in the real estate business like I am gets to be a pretty shrewd judge of human nature has to be and while I haven't actually been in Europe the way you have haven't had time somebody has to stay home and pay taxes and keep an eye on things while you lucky young fellows are seeing the world but human nature is the same anywhere and if we dropped just one little bomb on Minsk or Pinsk or one of those places they would see the light right quick and we could stop all this diddling around that's making it tough on the business man. Don't you agree?"

I said he had a point. They left and he said that he would ring me tomorrow and show me some choice lots that could be handled on almost nothing down and were certain to go way up what with a new missile plant coming in here soon. "Nice listening to your experiences, Mr. Jordan, real pleasant. Sometime I must tell you about something that happened to me in Tijuana but not with the wife around ha ha!"

Joan said to me, "I can't see why she married him. Pour me another drink, hon, a double, I need

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it. I'm going to turn the oven down, dinner will keep."

We both had a double and then another, and had dinner about eleven. Joan got tearful when I insisted on going home around three. She told me I was chicken and I agreed; she told me things could have been so different if I hadn't insisted on going into the Army and I agreed again; she told me to go out the back way and not turn on any lights and she never wanted to see me again and Jim was going to Sausalito the seventeenth.

I caught a plane for Los Angeles next day.

Now look—I am *not* blaming Joan. I like Joan. I respect her and will always be grateful to her. She is a fine person. With superior early advantages—say in Nevia—she'd be a *Wow!* She's quite a gal, even so. Her house was clean, her babies were clean and healthy and well cared for. She's generous and thoughtful and good-tempered.

Nor do I feel guilty. If a man has any regard for a girl's feelings, there is one thing he cannot refuse: a return bout if she wants one. Nor will I pretend that I didn't want it, too.

But I felt upset all the way to Los Angeles. Not over her husband, he wasn't hurt. Not over Joanie, she was neither swept off her feet nor likely to suffer remorse. Joanie is a good kid and had made a good adjustment between her nature and an impossible society.

Still, I was upset.

A man must not criticize a woman's most womanly quality. I must make it clear that little Joanie was just as sweet and just as generous as the younger Joanie who had sent me off to the Army feeling grand. The fault lay with me; *I* had changed.

My complaints are against a whole culture with no individual sharing more than a speck of blame. Let me quote that widely traveled culturologist and rake, Dr. Rufo:

"Oscar, when you get home, don't expect too much of your feminine compatriots. You're sure to be disappointed and the poor dears aren't to blame. American women, having been conditioned out of their sex instincts, compensate by compulsive interest in rituals over the dead husk of sex . . . and each one is sure she knows 'intuitively' the right ritual for conjuring the corpse. She *knows* and nobody can tell her any different . . . especially a man unlucky enough to be in bed with her. So don't try. You will either make her furious or crush her spirit. You'll be attacking that most Sacred of Cows: the myth that women know all about sex, just from being women."

Rufo had frowned. "The typical American female is sure that she has genius as a couturière, as an interior decorator, as a gourmet

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cook, and, always, as a courtesan. Usually she is wrong on four counts. But don't try to tell her so."

He had added, "Unless you can catch one not over twelve and segregate her, especially from her mother—and even that may be too late. But don't misunderstand me; it evens out. The American male is convinced that he is a great warrior, a great statesman, and a great lover. Spot checks prove that he is as deluded as she is. Or worse. Historo-culturally speaking, there is strong evidence that the American male, rather than the female, murdered sex in your country."

"What can *I* do about it?"

"Slip over to France now and then. Frenchwomen are almost as ignorant but not nearly as conceited and often are teachable."

When my plane landed, I put the subject out of mind as I planned to be an anchorite a while. I learned in the Army that no sex is easier than a starvation allowance—and I had serious plans.

I had decided to be the square I naturally am, with hard work and a purpose in life. I could have used those Swiss bank accounts to be a playboy. But I had been a playboy, it wasn't my style.

I had been on the biggest binge in history—one I wouldn't believe if I didn't have so much loot. Now was time to settle down and join Heroes Anonymous. *Being* a hero is okay. But a *retired* hero—first he's a bore, then he's a bum.

My first stop was Caltech. I could now afford the best and Caltech's only rival is where they tried to outlaw sex entirely. I had seen enough of that dreary graveyard in 1942-45.

The Dean of Admissions was not encouraging. "Mr. Gordon, you know that we turn down more than we accept? Nor could we give you full credit on this transcript. No slur on your former school—and we do like to give ex-servicemen a break—but this school has higher standards. Another thing, you won't find Pasadena a cheap place to live."

I said I would be happy to take whatever standing I merited, and showed him my bank balance (one of them) and offered a check for a year's fees. He wouldn't take it but loosened up. I left with the impression that a place might be found for E. C. "Oscar" Gordon.

I went downtown and started the process to make me legally "Oscar" instead of "Evelyn Cyril." Then I started job hunting.

I found one out in the Valley, as a junior draftsman in a division of a subsidiary of a corporation that made tires, food machinery, and other things—missiles in this case. This was part of the Gordon Rehabilitation Plan. A few months over the drafting board would get me into the swing again and I planned to

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study evenings and behave myself. I found a furnished apartment in Sawtelle and bought a used Ford for commuting.

I felt relaxed then; "Milord Hero" was buried. All that was left was the Lady Vivamus, hanging over the television. But I balanced her in hand first and got a thrill out of it. I decided to find a salle d'armes and join its club. I had seen an archery range in the Valley, too, and there ought to be someplace where American Rifle Association members fired on Sundays. No need to get flabby—

Meanwhile I would forget the loot in Switzerland. It was payable in gold, not funny money, and if I let it sit, it might be worth more—maybe much more—from inflation than from investing it. Someday it would be capital, when I opened my own firm.

That's what I had my sights on: Boss. A wage slave, even in brackets where Uncle Sugar takes more than half, is still a slave. But I had learned from Her Wisdom that a boss must train; I could not buy "Boss" with gold.

So I settled down. My name change came through; Caltech conceded that I could look forward to moving to Pasadena—and mail caught up with me.

Mother sent it to my aunt, she forwarded it to the hotel address I had first given, eventually it reached my flat. Some were letters mailed in the States over a year ago, sent on to Southeast Asia, then Germany, then Alaska, then more changes before I read them in Sawtelle.

One offered that bargain on investment service again; this time I could knock off 10% more. Another was from the coach at college—on plain stationery and signed in a scrawl. He said certain parties were determined to see the season start off with a bang. Would $250 per month change my mind? Phone his home number, collect. I tore it up.

The next was from the Veterans' Administration, dated just after my discharge, telling me that as a result of *Barton vs United States*, et al., it had been found that I was legally a "war orphan" and entitled to $110/month for schooling until age twenty-three.

I laughed so hard I hurt.

After some junk was one from a Congressman. He had the honor to inform me that, in cooperation with the Veterans of Foreign Wars, he had submitted a group of special bills to correct injustices resulting from failure to classify correctly persons who were "war orphans," that the bills had passed under consent, and that he was happy to say that one affecting me allowed me to my twenty-seventh birthday to complete my education inasmuch as my twenty-third birthday had passed before the error was rectified. I am, sir, sincerely, etc.

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I couldn't laugh. I thought how much dirt I would have eaten, or —you name it—the summer I was conscripted if I had been sure of $110 a month. I wrote that Congressman a thank-you letter, the best I knew how.

The next item looked like junk. It was from Hospitals' Trust, Ltd., therefore a pitch for a donation or a hospital insurance ad—but I couldn't see why anyone in Dublin would have me on their list.

Hospitals' Trust asked if I had Irish Hospitals' Sweepstake ticket number such-and-such, and its official receipt? This ticket had been sold to J. L. Weatherby, Esq. Its number had been drawn in the second unit drawing, and had been a ticket of the winning horse. J. L. Weatherby had been informed and had notified Hospitals' Trust, Ltd., that he had disposed of ticket to E. C. Gordon, and, on receiving receipt, had mailed it to such party.

Was I the "E. C. Gordon," did I have the ticket, did I have the receipt? H.T.Ltd. would appreciate an early reply.

The last item in the stack had an A.P.O. return address. In it was an Irish Sweepstake receipt—and a note: "This should teach me not to play poker. Hope it wins you something—J.L.Weatherby." The cancellation was over a year old.

I stared at it, then got the papers I had carried through the universes. I found the matching ticket. It was bloodstained but the number was clear.

I looked at the letter. *Second* unit drawing—

I started examining tickets under bright light. The others were counterfeit. But the engraving of *this* ticket and *this* receipt was sharp as paper money. I don't know where Weatherby bought that ticket, but he did not buy it from the thief who sold me mine.

Second drawing—I hadn't known there was more than one. But drawings depend on the number of tickets sold, in units of 120,000. I had seen the results of only the *first*.

Weatherby had mailed the receipt care of Mother, to Wiesbaden, and it must have been in Elmendorf when I was in Nice—then had gone to Nice, and back to Elmendorf because Rufo had left a forwarding address with American Express; Rufo had known all about me and taken steps to cover my disappearance.

On that morning over a year earlier while I sat in a café in Nice, I held a winning ticket with the receipt in the mail. If I had looked farther in that Herald-Tribune than the "Personal" ads I would have found the results of the Second Unit drawing and never answered that ad.

I would have collected $140,000, never have seen Star a second time—

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Or would Her Wisdom have been balked?

Would I have refused to follow my "Helen of Troy" simply because my pockets were lined with money?

I gave myself the benefit of doubt. *I would have walked the Glory Road anyhow!*

At least, I hoped so.

Next morning I phoned the plant, then went to a bank and through a routine I had gone through twice in Nice.

Yes, it was a good ticket. Could the bank be of service in collecting it? I thanked them and left.

A little man from Internal Revenue was on my doorstep—

Almost— He buzzed from below while I was writing to Hospitals' Trust, Ltd.

Presently I was telling him that I was damned if I would! I'd leave the money in Europe and they could whistle! He said mildly not to take that attitude, as I would have to pay the tax anyhow and he hoped I was just blowing off steam because the I.R.S. didn't like paying informers' fees but would if my actions showed that I was trying to evade the tax.

They had me boxed. I collected $140,000 and paid $103,000 to Uncle Sugar. The mild little man pointed out that it was better that way; so often people put off paying and got into trouble.

Had I been in Europe, it would have been $140,000 *in gold*— but now it was $37,000 in paper —because free and sovereign Americans can't have gold. They might start a war, or turn Communist, or something. No, I couldn't leave the $37,000 in Europe as gold; that was illegal, too. They were very polite.

I mailed 10%, $3,700, to Sgt. Weatherby and told him the story. I took $33,000 and set up a college trust for my siblings, handled so that my folks wouldn't know until it was needed. I crossed my fingers and hoped that news about this ticket would not reach Alaska. The L.A. papers never had it, but word got around somehow; I found myself on endless sucker lists, got letters offering golden opportunities, begging loans, or demanding gifts.

It was a month before I realized I had forgotten the California State Income Tax. I never did sort out the red ink.

XXII

I GOT BACK TO THE OLD drawing board, slugged away at books in the evening, watched a little television, weekends some fencing.

But I kept having this dream—

I had it first right after I took that job and now I was having it every night—

I'm heading along this long, long road and I round a curve and there's a castle up ahead. It's beautiful, pennants flying from

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turrets and a winding climb to its drawbridge. But I know, I just *know*, that there is a princess captive in its dungeon.

That part is always the same. Details vary. Lately the mild little man from Internal Revenue steps into the road and tells me that toll is paid here—10% more than whatever I've got.

Other times it's a cop and he leans against my horse (sometimes it has four legs, sometimes eight) and writes a ticket for obstructing traffic, riding with out-of-date license, failing to observe stop sign, and gross insubordination. He wants to know if I have a permit to carry that lance?—and tells me that game laws require me to tag any dragons killed.

Other times I round that turn and a solid wave of freeway traffic, five lanes wide, is coming at me. That one is worst.

I started writing this after the dreams started. I couldn't see going to a headshrinker and saying, "Look, Doc, I'm a hero by trade and my wife is Empress in another universe—" I had even less desire to lie on his couch and tell how my parents mistreated me as a child (they didn't) and how I found out about little girls (that's *my* business).

I decided to talk it out to a typewriter.

It made me feel better but didn't stop the dreams. But I learned a new word: "acculturated." It's what happens when a member of one culture shifts to another, with a sad period when he doesn't fit. Those Indians you see in Arizona towns, not doing anything, looking in shop windows or just standing. Acculturation. They don't fit.

I was taking a bus down to see my ear, nose, and throat doctor—Star promised me that her therapy plus that at Center would free me of the common cold—and it has; I don't catch *anything*. But even therapists that administer Long-Life can't protect human tissues against poison gas; L.A. smog was getting me. Eyes burning, nose stopped up—twice a week I went down to get horrid things done to my nose. I used to park my car and go down Wilshire by bus, as parking was impossible close in.

In the bus I overheard two ladies: "—much as I despise them, you *can't* give a cocktail party without inviting the Sylvesters."

It sounded like a foreign language. Then I played it back and understood the words.

But *why* did she have to invite the Sylvesters?

If she despised them, why didn't she either ignore them, or drop a rock on their heads?

In God's name, why give a "cocktail party?" People who don't like each other particularly, standing around (never enough chairs), talking about things they aren't interested in, drinking

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drinks they don't want (why set a *time* to take a drink?) and getting high so that they won't notice they aren't having fun. *Why?*

I realized that acculturation had set in. I didn't fit.

I avoided buses thereafter and picked up five traffic tickets and a smashed fender. I quit studying, too. Books didn't seem to make sense. It warn't the way I larned it back in dear old Center.

But I stuck to my job as a draftsman. I always have been able to draw and soon I was promoted to major work.

One day the Chief Draftsman called me over. "Here, Gordon, this assembly you did—"

I was proud of that job. I had remembered something I had seen on Center and had designed it in, reducing moving parts and improving a clumsy design into one that made me feel good. It was tricky and I had added an extra view. "Well?"

He handed it back. "Do it over. Do it right."

I explained the improvement and that I had done the drawing a better way to—

He cut me off. "We don't want it done a better way, we want it done *our* way."

"Your privilege," I agreed and resigned by walking out.

My flat seemed strange at that time on a working day. I started to study "Strength of Materials"—and chucked the book aside. Then I stood and looked at the Lady Vivamus.

"Dum Vivimus, Vivamus!" Whistling, I buckled her on, drew blade, felt that thrill run up my arm.

I returned sword, got a few things, travelers' cheques and cash mostly, walked out. I wasn't going anywhere, just that-away!

I had been striding along maybe twenty minutes when a prowl car pulled up and took me to the station.

Why was I wearing that thing? I explained that gentlemen wore swords.

If I would tell them what movie company I was with, a phone call could clear it up. Or was it television?

Did I have a license for concealed weapons? I said it wasn't concealed. They told me it was—by that scabbard. I mentioned the Constitution; I was told that the Constitution sure as hell didn't mean walking around city streets with a toad sticker like that. A cop whispered to the sergeant, "Here's what we got him on, Sarge. The blade is longer than—" I think it was three inches. There was trouble when they tried to take the Lady Vivamus away from me. Finally I was locked up, sword and all.

Two hours later my lawyer got it changed to "disorderly conduct" and I was released, with talk of a sanity hearing.

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I paid him and thanked him and took a cab to the airport and a plane to San Francisco. At the port I bought a large bag, one that would take the Lady Vivamus cater-cornered.

That night in San Francisco I went to a party. I met this chap in a bar and bought him a drink and he bought me one and I stood him to dinner and we picked up a gallon of wine and went to this party. I had been explaining to him that what sense was there in going to school to learn one way when there was already a better way? As silly as an Indian studying buffalo calling! Buffalos are in zoos! Acculturated, that's what it was!

Charlie said he agreed perfectly and his friends would like to hear it. So we went and I paid the driver to wait but took my suitcase inside.

Charlie's friends didn't want to hear my theories but the wine was welcome and I sat on the floor and listened to folk singing. The men wore beards and didn't comb their hair. The beards helped, it made it easy to tell which were girls. One beard stood up and recited a poem. Old Jocko could do better blind drunk but I didn't say so.

It wasn't like a party in Nevia and certainly not in Center, except this: I got propositioned. I might have considered it if this girl hadn't been wearing sandals. Her toes were dirty. I thought of Zhai-ee-van and her dainty, clean fur, and told her thanks, I was under a vow.

The beard who had recited the poem came over and stood in front of me. "Man, like what rumble you picked up that scar?"

I said it had been in Southeast Asia. He looked at me scornfully. "Mercenary!"

"Well, not always," I told him. "Sometimes I fight for free. Like right now."

I tossed him against a wall and took my suitcase outside and went to the airport—and then Seattle and Anchorage, Alaska, and wound up at Elmendorf AFB, clean, sober, and with the Lady Vivamus disguised as fishing tackle.

Mother was glad to see me and the kids seemed pleased—I had bought presents between planes in Seattle—and my stepdaddy and I swapped yarns.

I did one important thing in Alaska; I flew to Point Barrow. There I found part of what I was looking for: no pressure, no sweat, not many people. You look out across the ice and know that only the North Pole is over that way, and a few Eskimos and fewer white people here. Eskimos are every bit as nice as they have been pictured. Their babies never cry, the adults never seem cross—only the dogs staked-out between the huts are bad-tempered.

But Eskimos are "civilized"

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now; the old ways are going. You can buy a choc malt at Barrow and airplanes fly daily in a sky that may hold missiles tomorrow.

But they still seal amongst the ice floes, the village is rich when they take a whale, half starved if they don't. They don't count time and they don't seem to worry about anything—ask a man how old he is, he answers: "Oh, I'm quite of an age." That's how old Rufo is. Instead of goodbye, they say, "Sometime again!" No particular time and again we'll see you.

They let me dance with them. You must wear gloves (in their way they are as formal as the Doral) and you stomp and sing with the drums—and I found myself weeping. I don't know why. It was a dance about a little old man who doesn't have a wife and now he sees a seal—

I said, "Sometime again!"—went back to Anchorage and to Copenhagen. From 30,000 feet the North Pole looks like prairie covered with snow, except black lines that are water. I never expected to see the North Pole.

From Copenhagen I went to Stockholm. Marjatta was not with her parents but was only a square away. She cooked me that Swedish dinner, and her husband is a good Joe. From Stockholm I phoned a "Personal" ad to the Paris edition of the *Herald-Tribune,* then went to Paris.

I kept the ad in daily and sat across from the Two Maggots and stacked saucers and tried not to fret. I watched the ma'm'selles and thought about what I might do.

If a man wanted to settle down for forty years or so, wouldn't Nevia be a nice place? Okay, it has dragons. It doesn't have flies, nor mosquitoes, nor smog. Nor parking problems, nor freeway complexes that look like diagrams for abdominal surgery. Not a traffic light anywhere.

Muri would be glad to see me. I might marry her. And maybe little whatever-her-name-was, her kid sister, too. Why not? Marriage customs aren't everywhere those they use in Paducah. Star would be pleased; she would like being related to Jocko by marriage.

But I would go see Star first, or soon anyhow, and kick that pile of strange shoes aside. But I wouldn't stay; it would be "sometime again" which would suit Star. It is a phrase, one of the few, that translates exactly into Centrist jargon—and means exactly the same.

"Sometime again," because there are other maidens, or pleasing facsimiles, elsewhere, in need of rescuing. Somewhere. And a man must work at his trade, which wise wives know.

"I cannot rest from travel; I will drink life to the lees." A long road, a trail, a "Tramp Royal," with no certainty of what you'll

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eat or where or if, nor where you'll sleep, nor with whom. But somewhere is Helen of Troy and all her many sisters and there is still noble work to be done.

A man can stack a lot of saucers in a month and I began to fume instead of dream. Why the hell didn't Rufo show up? I brought this account up to date from sheer nerves. Has Rufo gone back? Or is he dead?

Or was he "never born"? Am I a psycho discharge and what is in this case I carry with me wherever I go? A sword? I'm afraid to look, so I do—and now I'm afraid to ask. I met an old sergeant once, a thirty-year man, who was convinced that he owned all the diamond mines in Africa; he spent his evenings keeping books on them. Am I just as happily deluded? Are these francs my monthly disability check?

Does anyone ever get two chances? Is the Door in the Wall always gone when next you look? Where do you catch the boat for Brigadoon? Brother, it's like the post office in Brooklyn: *You can't get there from here!*

I'm going to give Rufo two more weeks—

I've heard from Rufo! A clipping of my ad was forwarded to him but he had a little trouble. He wouldn't say much by phone but I gather he was mixed up with a carnivorous Fraulein and got over the border almost sans culottes. But he'll be here tonight. He is quite agreeable to a change in planets and universes and says he has something interesting in mind. A little risky perhaps, but not dull. I'm sure he's right both ways. Rufo might steal your cigarettes and certainly your wench but things aren't dull around him —and he would die defending your rear.

So tomorrow we are heading up that Glory Road, rocks and all!

Got any dragons you need killed?

An expanded version of this novel will be published this fall by G. P. Putnam's Sons, in a case-bound book priced at $3.95.

ASIMOV, BESTER, BONESTELL, DE CAMP, DAVIDSON, HENDERSON, MACLEISH, MATHESON, REYNOLDS will entertain in our 14th ANNIVERSARY ALL-STAR ISSUE, on sale August 29.

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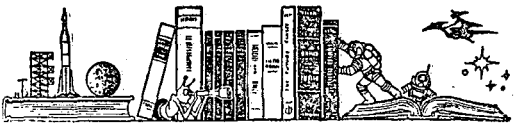
BOOKS



CAT'S CRADLE, **Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.**, Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, $3.95

This is a wild and way-way-*way*-out book, which might have been rather hard to read if the author hadn't cleverly broken it down into page-and-a-half "chapters" with funny headings. Vonnegut is a big, likeable, cynical, soft-spoken man of almost incredible potential, a potential which this book, good (mostly) as it is, doesn't more than barely begin to realize. However, since I'm supposed to review not the author but the book—Okay. CAT'S CRADLE, then, is a satire. For the most part, it's a very funny satire, particular emphasis being on atomic scientists, ugly (or "Ugly") Americans, Caribbean dictators, sex symbols, politics, religion, and Zen Buddhism. Undertakers, stenographers, the Marine Corps, and sundry other humanoids take their lick, too: but mainly it is Zen and "pure" lead-where-it-may capital-S Science that gets the bumps. The book's protagonist-author starts on the trail of Dr. Felix Hoenikker who helped invent the atomic bomb and, it turns out, all by himself invented something even deadlier, viz. "Ice-nine." Trail leads him to Hoenikker's three incredible offspring, a Creole-Mestizo girl of matchless beauty, the island Republic of San Lorenzo, and, well, Ragnarok. After which it is impossible to be funny, and what is there left to satirize? I wouldn't be surprised, though, if the book didn't become as much of a cult-object as (ugh) *Franny And Zooey*—you should excuse the expression. The apparatus of Bokonism, the pseudo-Zen sect, provides all sorts of adoptable neologisms, and all that bit. The conclusion—that the Universe has no meaning and that its Creator is Not Nice—is inescapably reminiscent of Harry Hershfield's story of the lady at the resort who complained, "The food here is rotten, and they give you such small portions." Mr. Vonnegut can, and will, I am sure, do better. Jacket design by Ben Feder, Inc. is not bad.

THE WITCH-CULT IN WESTERN EUROPE, **M. A. Murray**, Oxford, $1.50

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This is a reprint of an epochal work on witchcraft. Previous writers had regarded witches either as hysterics or innocent victims or tools of Satan; Dr. Margaret Murray set forth a view entirely different: that "witchcraft" was the ancient fertility religion of pre-Christian Western Europe, forced underground. Her book is persuasive, although most of her fellow-anthropologists resisted persuasion. It must be read by anyone with any interest in the subject.

ATLANTIS, THE ANTEDILUVIAN WORLD, **Ignatius Donnelly**, Xanadu-Crown, $1.65

Atlantis, Atlantis, Atlantis! Lovely old legend of my childhood, how I would like to believe in you! At times I think I almost *might* —and then the Atlantologists come along with "proof", and I am again a sceptic. Well, well, here is a new edition of *the* Atlantis book, by Congressman Ignatius Donnelly, Rep. (Minn.) —or is it? Parts of it have admittedly been omitted; how much, I couldn't say without referring to the original text; and quite a lot added. Among the deportees are "many of the opinions expressed by contemporaries of Donnelly's [which] have now been proved to have been based on inadequate data"—or, in other words, wrong. At any rate, Donnelly (he later left his Atlantis studies for the Baconian theory) and his successors have here amassed lots of fascinating data. The proof keeps getting lost in the pudding . . . but it is such an interesting pudding. None of it seems to add up to Atlantis, alas, but considering what great voyages we now know to have been made in such tiny vessels (the Atlantic crossed in rowboats and kayaks in modern times, for instance), it is hardly necessary to explain pre-Columbian European and African influences in America by providing a great big continent as a stepping-stone. Anyway, it all stems from Plato, and who in the *Hell* can believe Plato intended to be taken seriously in his assertion that Critias the Grandson related word for word that long and complex account of Atlantis delivered to him by Critias the Grandfather when he was only ten years old? Ward Moore's story of the Duke of Wellington: the Duke of Wellington, best-known face in England, in full-dress uniform and all his decorations, was stopped by some poop who said, "Mr. Jones, I believe?" Barked the Duke, "If you believe *that*, sir, you'll believe anything!" And, oh, yes, there is a wonderfully scornful attack on an F&SF contributor described as "J. Sprague du Camp"!

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KOREAN FOLK TALES, **Im Bang and Yi Ryuk**, trans. by **James S. Gale**, Tuttle, $2.95

The subtitle of this pleasing and unpretentious volume is "Imps, Ghosts, And Fairies"—with which most, but not all, of the stories are concerned. It was compiled by the translator from MSS of two well-known Korean scholars and raconteurs, the 15th c. Yi Ryuk and the 17th and 18th c. Im Bang. We know so little of Korea—perhaps it was our very ignorance which cost us so dearly by reason of the late undeclared war there. I cannot say that a book of this sort casts any light on current political problems—except to remind us, perhaps, wryly, that the former "Hermit Kingdom" suffered more since its Liberation than in its Captivity. At any rate, here are tales—mostly quite short—of Buddhist priests, metamorphoses, brave governors, hobgoblins, Gogolesque civil servants, haunted houses, geomancers, possession, starveling scholars, and other anecdotes of the strange and the curious. M. Kuwata's jacket design is excellent.

Briefly Noted: THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION, TWELFTH SERIES, **Avram Davidson**, ed., Doubleday, $3.95. — Selected stories of 1962.

THROUGH TIME AND SPACE WITH FERDINAND FEGHOOT, **Grendel Briarton**, Paradox Press, $1.25.—All but five of these japes appeared in this Magazine. Illustrated by Bruce Ariss, foreward by R. Bretnor.

—AVRAM DAVIDSON

TRIUMPH, **Philip Wylie**, Doubleday, $4.50

Survival after World War III has been the subject of enough fiction to stock a sizable fallout shelter. Philip Wylie's contribution to this literature is a novel about a super $200,000,000 hideout under a Connecticut hill built by a foresighted billionaire. Here for two years live the benefactor, his wife, daughter, pious Nego butler, *his* daughter (an Admirable Chrichtoness), Dick and Dorothy, two property children brought on stage periodically and then forgotten by the author, a Jewish scientist of enormous erudition and saintliness, an American Chinese girl (Vassar), a sansei young man whom Mr. Wylie mistakenly calls a nisei, a meter reader, a playboy, a gigolo, and the exmistress of the billionaire.

Between the Russians and the Americans the whole northern hemisphere is destroyed except for these characters. A Soviet plot to hide picked cadres to take over the world is foiled by American nuclear subs and a carrier who annihilate the skulking Rus-

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sians and then die nobly. Australia, suddenly converted to racial equality, then forms the nucleus of a world government and rescues what's left of our assorted heroes and heroines while the butler recites the 23rd Psalm.

All the women are described as "beautiful." All the men are upstanding except for the gigolo who reforms in the best Rover Boy tradition, and the playboy who dies, a little like Oswald Alving and a little like Sidney Carton. They play games endlessly to keep fit and happy and ward off stir-bugginess. They also study like mad and either do or do not practice celibacy—the author can't seem to make up his mind. And they chuckle—zounds, how they chuckle! How they have the breath for it is inexplicable since they are constructed entirely of cardboard.

One would expect at least a minimum of craftsmanship from the author of *Finnley Wren* and 25 other books. None is perceptible in TRIUMPH (the title is sarcastical), certainly not in the interminable, windy sermon which is evidently Mr. Wylie's pride (and reason for the novel), but not the readers' joy. Everything in this book has been said before, better, less verbosely, and more convincingly. If TRIUMPH depicts the night of civilization it is an amateur night.

—WARD MOORE

NOTICE! AVISSO! UWAGA! BEKANTMACHUNG! SHRDLU! The DisCon (World Science Fiction Convention XXI) will be held Labor Day Weekend — 31st August, 1st and 2nd September, 1963. Locale: Statler-Hilton Hotel, Washington, D.C. Guest of Honor: *Will Jenkins* (*"Murray Leinster"*). Toastmaster: *Theodore Sturgeon* (*"Theodore Sturgeon"*). Present: all sorts of fabulous authors, editors, and fans. Addresses, panel discussions, movies, banquet luncheon, HUGO awards, masked ball, and happy socializing galore! Send $3 registration fee to Bill Evans, Box 36, Mt. Rainier, Md.; and receive Progress Reports and Program.

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Herbert W. Franke is an Austrian scientist, author of a number of scientific and technical books, as well as several volumes of Science Fiction. This story about a man who saw—or thought he saw—robots everywhere is taken from Mr. Franke's book « The Green Comet », which has not yet been published in the United States.

THE MAN WHO FEARED ROBOTS

by Herbert W. Franke

(translated by Charlotte Franke-Winheller and Paul Ritchie)

THE DOCTOR SAID, "LEAN BACK, please."

"I'm all right," answered the patient in a low voice.

"On the contrary," said the doctor. "However, we shall do everything we can to make you well again."

While the drug began to affect the patient, his features softened: his lids flickered shut.

The doctor spoke in a deep, monotonous voice. "As you sleep all kinds of thoughts will come to you—but they will not be bad thoughts—they will not harm you. It will be as if another person were reliving these experiences. And it will be good to talk . . . to find release. Later, everything will appear clear and easier for you. Try and tell me about the occasion before . . . all this happened to you . . . how you walked with your wife through the machine hall . . . in your factory . . . in your factory. Think about it. Listen! Wheels are turning, stamping machines are roaring. You are standing in front of the presses . . . your devoted wife beside you. Then . . . ?"

Doctor and assistant were tense as they gazed at the agonized features of the patient. His lips moved gradually; he spoke painfully. "Suzanne," he whispered. "You see, I was holding her left

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arm—wanting to draw her back from the pneumatic drills she was so interested in. And she turned . . . stumbled . . . and instinctively tried to balance herself . . . with her right hand. Oh, God . . . her forearm came in contact with the presses . . ."

"Go on."

"Her . . . her . . ."

"But your wife was not hurt," said the doctor, soothingly. "Not seriously hurt. A minor accident . . . abrasions which she had bandaged. Nothing really to worry about." He glanced at his assistant, then added, "Was it that which gave you the shock?"

The patient began to murmur again. Yet every word could be clearly understood. "Yes," he whispered. "The hammer hit her on the forearm and . . . she didn't even notice it! Only when . . . when . . . she felt me looking at her did she . . . run away."

He whimpered, "my wife is a robot!"

"No," said the doctor, calmly. "Your wife had had an accident when she was a child. She simply has to wear . . . a false arm. But she has been marvelously discreet. She never dared to expose it, refer to it . . . even to you!"

The patient's head sank back into the soft, thick cushions.

The doctor spoke again. "But then, you have been aware of being molested . . . haunted even . . . by robots before, haven't you?" he said. "Tell me, wasn't there . . . some other experience? Think about it and try to tell me."

"I grew up in the country," said the patient, his voice soft but urgent, his eyes still closed—"During the winter we heated an iron stove which on extremely cold days became frequently red-hot. It was on such a day that my mother sat near the stove, her back to it. But suddenly she leaned back too far . . . and touched . . . the glowing iron."

"I know," said the doctor. "On that occasion you lost your mother. But then . . . you were young, healthy, adaptable. You got over it."

"But you don't know all of it," answered the patient querulously. "Not by any means. You see, her back began to burn. It burned like celluloid. I . . . I . . . tried to smother the fire with a cloth but . . . when I pulled the cloth away . . . something was hanging to it . . . a mesh . . . a wire netting came loose from her skin."

He whimpered; "my mother was a robot!"

"No," said the doctor, calmly. "She was simply wearing a new dress made of plastic netting around which cellular tissue is woven. The cellular tissue burned at once and the plastic netting hardened in the fire. You see that now, don't you?"

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"Yes," whispered the patient, wearily.

"It must be back even further," said the doctor to the assistant. "We will have to proceed."

Turning to the patient lying pale on the cushions, he said, calmly, "You know, I want you to try and believe that a robot has never harmed a human being . . . that they are our friends . . . our assistants in all our enterprises. So think again . . . about your childhood . . . about . . . something that frightened you then."

The patient moved his eyes uneasily. Wrinkles spread across his forehead like pushing waves on water. An agonised expression came . . . and passed. He whispered, "It was not long before the death of my mother. I was playing with Gregory—a neighbour's son. We had become rather thirsty what, with playing . . . mucking about after . . . some chemical experiments I had been interested in. Well, I had left unnoticed on the window sill . . . a glass of hydrochloric acid. In a mad moment Gregory reached for it. I . . . I . . . shouted at him not to touch it but he took no notice and put it to his lips. When I reached him he had already drunk half of it. Then . . . he lifted his arm to his throat and bowed to vomit. First . . . he spat out his tongue . . . then some teeth . . . and after that . . . two yellowish lumps from which leaf-like peel came off. I know they were the screws which fastened his teeth to his jaws."

He whimpered, "Gregory was a robot!"

"Yes, Gregory was a robot," admitted the doctor calmly, "and was not seriously hurt. He was sent to the central repair depot and made healthy again. If he had been human he would not have survived, you see, so you can be thankful that he was what he was. You see that now, don't you?"

The patient nodded silently.

The doctor leant over the patient and put all of his healing power into his words. "Everything, you see is in perfect order. You have no problems. You are merely tired and need rest. When you awake you will be well again."

With emphasis he repeated, "Well again."

The patient stirred a little, breathed deeply. He was asleep.

The assistant sighed.

"What are we going to do," he asked, "if we make another mistake?" He fiddled with his skull—at the embossed joints near the hair line, in order to cool the positronic switches.

The doctor was silent. But he glanced with apprehension at the face of the man who slept. ◄

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It has been many years since Frank Sullivan's Mr. Arbuthnot, the Cliché Expert, used to testify in the New Yorker magazine. It has, in fact, we realize with a start of alarm and a twinge caused by the Jezail bullet we picked up in the Sepoy Mutiny, been so many years that probably Mr. Sharkey is not old enough to remember it. Never mind, it don't signify, he does quite well on his own in this tale of wealthy, cynical Nathan Crusk and his curious (and comprehensive) collection.

COLLECTOR'S ITEM

by Jack Sharkey

A MAN AS WEALTHY AS NATHAN Crusk can afford to indulge himself limitlessly in a hobby, and Nathan had been wealthy for the forty years since his twenty-first birthday, on which date he had inherited his late father's entire estate, so his hobby was indulged to the utmost. Crusk, always a cynic in his formative and school years, had decided, long before his heirship eventuated, to be a debunker. Having little faith in the mind of mankind, he chose to pursue his ambition by gathering together all the physical—thereby incontrovertible—proof that people simply did not know what they were talking about. It pleased him immeasurably, at his rare dinner parties (given, people sensed, solely as opportunities to display his latest acquisitions), to catch a person using a familiar simile, and then dragging that person by the arm to the vast single-story building that sprawled over the grounds behind the mansion, and showing the person what a fool that person was to have said such a thing.

Crusk was—as a necessary adjunct to his debunking—a collector. Let a man refer to a memory "like an elephant's", and Crusk would convey him to the stall in which he kept an elephant which could not remember where the hay-bales lay in its stall without being prodded by its mahout's ankus in the proper direction. The words "neat as a pin" sent his gnarled fingers dipping into a waistcoat pocket for a box in which lay the cruddiest, rustiest, bentest, pin in creation, and he would wave it in the speaker's

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face and dance up and down in mocking joy. Mention a beeline, and he would show you a hiveful of yellow-and-black insects that flew in confused circles. Let slip "straight as an arrow" and you would be handed a corkscrew shaft which—when released from a bow—looped the loop three times before clattering to earth.

Nathan Crusk's collection was unparelleled in the history of the world. Nothing approached it in magnitude, ingenuity, or scope. Yearly additions were built onto his storehouse of debunkism for the first twenty-five years of his indulgence, and then a very few rooms were added over the next fifteen, and then his collection was near completion, and he hummed gaily to himself as he strolled the corridors of the building, feasting his rheumy eyes on the items therein:

An unhappy lark, which was unhappy due to being leg-chained to its perch, thus simultaneously refuting "Happy as a lark" and "Free as a bird." A subservient, docile, and humble peacock. A weak ox. A calm hornet. Soft nails. Hard silk. A loose drum. A powerful kitten. A sober lord (hired by the day from an old English family). Bad gold. A bottle of wrong rain. White ink. A well-fed bear. A hideous button. A stupid fox. A convex pancake. A clumsy swan. A brave rabbit. a cold firecracker. A noisy mouse. An unclear bell. A green beet. A bold dove. Two thin thieves who were on the outs. A warm cucumber. An affadavit from a calendar-maker that days in June were no rarer than days in September, April and November. A lethargic colt. A low kite. A sturdy flower. A difficult pie. A— Well, a concrete rebuttal to every simile he had ever heard. Except one.

"Solid as the Rock of Gibraltar."

That was the phrase which haunted Crusk's dreams, which made him snap at his servants, keep to his room, toy with his food, and dwell listlessly upon the otherwise perfection of his vast amassment. It robbed much of the quivering joy from his contemplation of his horde. He could barely smile at his unsound dollar, dote upon his stale daisy, or purse his lips into a dirty whistle. In vain had he sent men to sound, explore and dig that impenetrable island. All the reports were the same: It was solid as— Well, as itself. In vain did his doctors warn him that such melancholy brooding would make him sick as a cat or even dead as a mackerel. He simply showed them, in order, a healthy cat, a lively mackerel, and the door. And he grumped and glowered and brooded the more.

Then one day, in his morning mail, a package arrived. On opening it, Nathan Crusk discovered a blob of what seemed to be singu-

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larly dirty gelatin, dark grey and slimy. He took up the pasteboard card which had lain half-imbedded in this unsightly mess, and read: "This is a block of granite, after a special treatment." Nothing else was on the card but a name—Albert Widge—and a telephone number.

"Pah!" said Nathan, dashing the box to the floor. "A fake! Another phony! Like those vendors who tried to sell me shale, soapstone and talc purported to be dug from the sides of my *bete noire* . . ." Then he looked at the quivering blob again, tapped it tentatively with his toe, and studied the resultant temblors in its shuddering form. If it were truly what it claimed to be—!

Having nothing to lose but a little time and the price of the call, Nathan dialed furiously, then waited. The phone was lifted immediately, on the first buzz. Nathan, before his party spoke, could detect much noise in the background, of many people, only slightly muffled, and had—before the first "Hello?" came over the wire—deduced that the rock-softening inventor was phoning from a booth in a public place.

"I take it you need money," was his rejoinder to the greeting. "If your claim is true, I will pay anything you ask."

"That— That will be wonderful, Mr. Crusk," said a weakly joyous male voice at the end of the line. "This—This *is* Mr. Crusk, isn't it?"

"Must we waste time with the amenities!?" snapped Nathan; "Of course this is me! And that's you, Albert Widge. You've no doubt sat waiting in that booth from the time you figured the package would have arrived. I don't enjoy all his dilly-dallying, Widge. Get over to my house at once." He slammed down the phone, then trotted gaily downstairs from his room to the kitchen where he ordered a meal for two that would awaken taste-buds Widge didn't know he possessed.

Albert Widge proved to be the prototype of struggling young inventors. His hair was combed, but in need of cutting; his smile pleasant, but in need of a good orthodontist; and his clothing a pair of blue pants, a brown jacket, and a tieless yellowed shirt, all in need of incineration. "I'm so pleased—" he began, extending his hand.

Nathan turned away and started for the dining room. "Eat first. I can't have you starving to death without revealing your secret. Eat quickly, and then we'll talk."

Albert Widge proved only too glad to do so, and his wineglass, soup dish, salad bowl, coffee cup, dinner plate, and brandy snifter were cleaned in minutes. Then he sat back, somewhat glassy-eyed, and gasped, "Now, what can I do for you?"

"Tell me about your inven-

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tion," said Nathan. "Is it chemical, physical or a combination of the two? How large is it? How soon can I get one?"

"It is physical," said Albert. "A modification of a radio transmitter. It takes the rough edges off rock crystals—being absorbed by them much as radio waves were picked up by the old crystal sets—and leaves them ovoid or even round, so that they 'flow' past one another instead of acting as mutual buttresses. The device with which I jellied the rock I sent you is the size of a small suitcase, although it need not be any larger to handle a larger rock, only utilize more power than was available through the electric outlet of my rented room. As to how soon you can get one— Well, there is only *the* one, as yet, but you are certainly free to purchase it, as soon as we can agree upon price."

"What are you asking?"

"A—" Albert blushed guiltily. "A million dollars . . .?" He cringed, as if expecting a violent rebuff. But instead, Nathan grinned toothily and slapped Albert upon the knee.

"I'll give you *ten* million. It is worth it to me. And I will personally pay the income taxes on that amount, so that you will have the total sum, unmilked, at your disposal."

"Golly, sir—!" Albert began, deliriously happy.

"*But*—!" said Nathan, and Albert's face became pale. "There is a condition, Widge. I am old, and likely to kick off at any moment, and I cannot spare the time to learn how to operate your machine. You yourself must come with me to Gibraltar. Once we have softened that pesky rock, we will return, and the money will be yours."

"The—The whole *island*?!" Albert gasped, whitely.

"Can it be done?" demanded Nathan.

"Why, yes—It can—But—"

"Then you must do it, or our interview is at an end, and you can take your invention and set fire to it for all I care."

"Oh," said Albert, perspiring freely. "I see. How long may I have to think it over?"

"Until I finish my brandy," said Nathan, lifting his snifter and tilting it into his mouth until not an amber droplet remained. He dabbed his withered lips with a silken napkin, then tossed it upon the table. "Well?"

"I will do it," Albert said hastily. "But only for the money, and not because it agrees with my basic principles."

"Fair enough," said Nathan, and they shook hands.

It was a cinch. In broad, bright Mediterranean daylight, Nathan Crusk sailed his yacht around the rocky island, while a trembling Albert Widge stood at his side, di-

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recting the invisible emanations toward Gibraltar from the small black box bolted to the deck. Power leads from the box went directly down to the frenzied innards of the yacht, where a massive dynamo churned out a walloping surge of electrical energy. "I don't see anything yet," Nathan said darkly, scanning the shoreline through a pair of expensive binoculars. "There's not a *ripple* of— Hold on!"

He leaned forward over the rail, straining to see better what he had only glimpsed. "It's quivering!" he crooned and whooped and hollered. "It's quaking! It's wobbling!"

Albert could only stare at the island and nod his head, his heart pumping wildly in his breast at the horror of his unmatched, undreamt of, sin. As in a distorting mirror, a mountainous wall of jellied rock undulated and bulged in the sunlight, and rivulets of sticky goo began running down its sides. Houses began to shrug down into the earth, left-side, right-side-left-side, until only startled chimneys were left puffing frantic hoots of smoke over the slick, slimy ground. People fleeing toward the sea took bounces that would have been the envy of professional trampolinists. And the island sagged, and dribbled, and splashed, and slowly flattened out into a burbling grey-black puddle that mingled with the gentle blue swells of the sea and then was gone.

A few survivors thrashed weakly toward the yacht, but Crusk set the yacht at full speed to the west, and left them flailing helplessly in the grip of the engulfing waters. "It's done!" he exulted. "My collection is complete. I need add nothing to it, now, since the solidity of Gibraltar cannot be a by-word!"

Albert, already feeling the pangs of a conscience that would dog him to his grave, had to shake his head in grim admiration, and admit, "Yes, you did it, all right. As much as I loath you, I have to agree. You're slick as the devil!"

Nathan whirled. "I'm—*What?*"

"Slick as the devil," said Albert, before the import of his statement came home to him. Then he said, "Oh. Oh, yes. Now I see. Mmmm . . . That *will* be a tough one to debunk, won't it!"

"Tough!" sobbed Nathan. "It's impossible! Where am I going to find a devil? *Any* kind of devil?" And so saying, he fell prone on the deck, frothing at the mouth, and in a few minutes succumbed to a fierce attack of apoplexy and was gone. An instant later, he was face to face with the devil, in its likeliest habitat.

The devil looked upon his quaking soul grimly, and said, "Got you at last, Nathan Crusk!" The devil, Nathan found, was not slick at all. In fact, he was quite rough on old Nathan. It provided for the collector his final fleeting moment of pleasure. ◄

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SCIENCE

In which Dr. Asimov—with some slight assistance from another savant—argues that We Are Not (to put it mildly) Alone.

WHO'S OUT THERE?

by Isaac Asimov

PROFESSOR CARL SAGAN (PRONOUNCED SAY'GUN) IS THAT PARAGON of scientists; one who occasionally interests himself in problems of peculiar fascination to the science fiction community and one who occasionally sends reprints of his papers to me. I have already written one article (BY JOVE, May 1962) based directly on one of his astronomical papers.

Consequently, when I learned that he was returning from his stint at Stanford University in California and was going to take up his position in the astronomy department at Harvard University, nothing would do but I must meet him. I called him, therefore, and we set up a luncheon date. The result was that I enjoyed a most pleasant luncheon and was rewarded with a number of interesting items.

One in particular was an advance copy of a paper entitled "Direct Contact Among Galactic Civilizations by Relativistic Interstellar Spaceflight" and you can tell from the title that this is something right up our alley. As I write, it is about to be published in a learned journal and some non-learned journals (such as *Life*) are expressing interest.

It seemed to me, however, that the contents of the article must not be allowed to remain buried in places such as *Life* but must be given the wider circulation (among those who really count, that is) guaranteed in the pages of this magazine.*

* *I must warn you that my report on Professor Sagan's paper occasionally contains ideas of my own which I do not always carefully distinguish from those of the professor. He must, therefore, on no account be held responsible for anything foolish I may happen to say.*

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To begin with, Sagan estimates the number of technically advanced civilizations (advanced enough to be capable of interstellar communication) now existing in the Galaxy. This is a favorite sport among astronomers these days (and even among nonastronomers such as myself) but this is the first time I have seen the details of the calculation given so clearly and in such detail.

Note, though, that the problem is to determine the number of such civilizations *now existing;* a civilization that existed in the past and is now extinct does us no good. To find out how many exist now, one must calculate how many originate per year and multiply that by the number of years each endures (on the average). If, just to take random figures, ten civilizations are formed each year and each lasts a thousand years, then (working strictly "on the average") there are ten thousand such civilizations now extant; ten of them one year old, ten two years old, ten three years old; and so on up to ten that are a thousand years old and about to be extinct. Each year ten new ones would be born and ten old ones die so that the number would stay at ten thousand.

The first problem, then, is to estimate how many technologically advanced civilizations are formed per year. We begin by considering the number of stars formed per year, since we can expect no civilizations in the total absence of stars.

The total number of stars in the Galaxy is estimated at 100,000,000,000 and the age of the Galaxy is about 10,000,000,000 years. This means that stars have been forming in the Galaxy at an average rate of ten per year. Of course, the rate of formation has very likely not been average at all times. At the present moment, the best estimate is that stars are being formed at the rate of only one per year, and, presumably, in the early days of the Galaxy they were being formed at a very rapid rate. Dr. Sagan, however, after some discussion feels it fair enough to keep to the average. Therefore we begin with the fundamental estimate that:

$$\text{Number of stars formed per year} = 10$$

But technically advanced civilizations do not develop upon stars, but upon planets revolving about those stars. The next step, then, is to estimate how many of the stars coming to birth are attended, then or ever, by planetary systems.

It turns out that there are two kinds of stars, those that rotate rapidly and those (like our Sun) that rotate slowly. The ones that rotate slowly

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are believed to do so because most of their angular momentum has been shifted outward to the planetary bodies. This is the case most certainly, for instance, with our Sun. Fully 98 % of the angular momentum of the Solar system is possessed by the planets; only 2 % by the Sun.

About 98 percent of the stars, it so happens, belong to those spectral classes associated with slow rotation, so we can conclude that just about every star is attended by a family of planets. Consequently:

Number of planetary systems
formed per year = 10

As we all realize, however, technical civilizations cannot be expected to develop on all planets indiscriminately. They won't develop unless a particular planet is of a type on which life (as we know it) can develop. Such planets should, as a minimum, be at a temperature where water (or some equivalent substance) may exist in form appropriate for the reactions of life. The temperature must never fall so low at any time in its orbit that all water is frozen, or rise so high that all water is vaporized—using water as the most natural example of a life medium.

It is supposed that where a planet revolves about a star belonging to a multiple system, such a temperature requirement cannot be met. The orbit is erratic enough to put any such planet into the too cold class or the too hot class periodically.

The number of stars that are members of multiple systems include about half of all stars. That leaves only the remaining half as possible illuminators of livable worlds. These consist of the lone-wolf stars (like our Sun) and we must ask ourselves how many planets suitable for life each of these lone-wolves possesses.

The only planetary system we can study in detail is our own and here we can make the following statements. One planet (the Earth) is definitely the abode of life. One planet (Mars) is, as far as we know, suitable for life as we know it and may even possess such life. There are reasons for arguing that life is conceivable on other planets as well but Sagan prefers to be conservative. Taking our own planetary system as typical (and we have no reason to think it is anything but typical) we can say that, on the average, each lone-wolf star possesses two planets capable of supporting life.

Since the lone-wolf stars represent half the total number of stars in the Galaxy and since carries two livable planets, the total number of livable planets is equal to the total number of stars:

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Number of livable planets
formed per year = 10

However, a technical civilization will not develop upon a planet capable of supporting life unless life does, in fact, develop upon it. The next step, then, is to estimate how frequently life develops on a livable planet.

Based on modern notions, it would seem that if a planet possessed the proper composition (approximately that of the primitive Earth or of the present Jovian planets) and the proper temperature, then the development of life is almost inevitable.* In our own Solar system, there are two Earth-type planets, Earth and Mars, and, indeed, life has developed on one and has, quite possibly, developed on the other as well. This is particularly impressive since Mars is only borderline Earth-type, and if life has developed on it then it ought certainly develop on any planet more closely approximating Earth conditions.

So we assume that every livable planet does, in fact, develop life and:

Number of life-systems
formed per year = 10

But life in and of itself is insufficient for a technical civilization. One must have intelligent life and here matters grow rather shaky. There is no way of estimating how often intelligence develops. Let us say that life has existed on Earth for 1,000,000,000 years and that reasonably intelligent man-like creatures have existed for 1,000,000 years. Both figures are reasonable and in that case, intelligence has existed during 0.1 percent of the history of life. Or, to put it another way, through 99.9 percent of life's history, intelligence did not exist and was, apparently, not missed.

There is no painful stretching of the imagination required to suppose that even if intelligence had not developed, life would have continued happily onward forever after. Might not intelligence be the result of an extremely lucky accident; so lucky that it is never likely to be duplicated in the course of the evolution of any other life-system?

Arguing against that is this: the evolutionary trend has been more or less constantly in favor of increased complexity and, in particular, of increased complexity of the nervous system. This makes sense since the more complex the nervous system, the more keenly an organism is

* *I'm saving this bit for another article someday, but take my word for it now.*

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aware of its environment and the more versatile is its fashion of responding—and both factors are of prime survival value. It seems fair to suppose that a similar trend will exist in other life-system evolutionary processes.

But if the nervous system continually increases in complexity then the development of intelligence is inevitable and, as a matter of fact, it may well have happened twice on Earth and not just once, for it is becoming more and more likely that certain cetaceans (dolphins and the like) are intelligent and are only debarred from unmistakeably showing it by the fact that they live in the sea and lack manipulative organs.

Consequently, we conclude that the development of intelligence is not fortuitous but, given enough time, inevitable. So next we ask what is "enough time?" Looking at it astronomically, intelligence developed on Earth at a time when the Sun was five billion years old, or only midway through its livable period. What's more, most stars are smaller than the Sun and have longer livable periods. There is no reason to suppose then that the time available is not "enough." Just about every life system ought to have enough time at its disposal to evolve intelligence.

Nevertheless, in order to pamper his own conservatism, Sagan estimates that only one life-system in ten will do so. Therefore:

Number of intelligent life-forms formed per year = 1

But even intelligence, in and of itself, is insufficient. We are trying to estimate the number of *technologically advanced* civilizations, and it is possible that an intelligent life form may never develop such a civilization. The dolphins never did and in all likelihood never will do so of themselves. Even mankind doesn't have a very good record if you consider the following:

Mankind has existed at a level of intelligence higher than that of the ape for at least 1,000,000 years, but how long has he been civilized?

The word "civilized" comes from the Latin word for "city" so that literally we are asking how long mankind has been a city-dweller. This is a good way of putting it for only with the development of agriculture could man stay in one place long enough to build a city and only with agriculture could he be assured of a food supply large enough to make it possible for him to divert enough of his energies to build one. Certainly the combination of agriculture and cities is a minimum requirement for what we usually think of as civilization.

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Well, the oldest cities are roughly 10,000 years old so that we can say that mankind has been civilized for only 1 percent of the time it has been intelligent. To put it another way: for 99 percent of the history of human intelligence, men have been savages everywhere. Even when civilization did develop, it involved, at first, only a small minority of mankind and spread outward among the savage majority but slowly. (In fact, the outward spread is not complete even now, ten thousand years after the beginnings of civilization.)

Furthermore, through much of the history of civilization, its basis has been non-technological in that the sources of the energy applied to the works of civilization were mainly that of animal muscle (including the human, of course). The energy of wind and water were used, but only in minor fashion. It is only in modern times that the energy of inanimate nature was put to work on a large scale.

This dates back to the invention of a practical steam engine in 1769. Man has possessed a technologically advanced civilization, then, for only about 200 years. In other words, for 99.98 percent of the time in which reasonably intelligent men roamed the Earth, no technological civilization worthy of the name existed. And when such a civilization developed, it did so in only a small section of the civilized world.

Finally, it is only in the last couple of decades that man's civilization became sufficiently advanced technologically to permit of interstellar communication and of a reasonable hope for eventual interstellar travel.

Can we then say that even where intelligent life develops, the chance of technological civilization is so small that it may be ignored and that we may forget the whole thing?

No, for as in the case of the development of intelligence it is possible to argue that we have witnessed an inevitable development. During man's million years of existence, he did not stand still. His brain underwent an almost explosive increase in size and it is only toward the very end of the period that the modern brain in its modern proportions was finally developed. Homo sapiens himself has only been dominant some forty thousand of years.

Once Homo sapiens ("modern man") came into being, civilization followed almost at once (evolutionarily speaking). Furthermore, it developed in several different places independently to prove that it was no accident. Even if we allow the civilizations of Sumaria, Egypt, Anatolia, and the Indus to be branches arising from a common source; there are still the civilizations arising in China, in the Yucatan and in Peru, all of them necessarily independent of each other.

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Technology developed only once, and that was in northwestern Europe. We will never know whether it could have developed elsewhere independently, since technology diffused outward from its single source so rapidly as to drown out any possible independent start elsewhere. However, a technological civilization almost developed during the great days of Alexandria two thousand years ago (but didn't for reasons we need not discuss here).

Consequently, we can assume that intelligent life will be inevitably followed by a technological civilization and that such a civilization moves toward interstellar travel with explosive speed. Once again, however, to be conservative, Professor Sagan assumes that only one out of ten intelligences will establish a technological civilization. This means:

Number of technological civilizations
formed per year = 1/10

Or, if you want to put it another way: Every ten years (on the average) another technological civilization capable of interstellar exploration originates in our Galaxy.

There's the first part of the problem solved (or at least estimated). With a technological civilization formed every ten years, it remains to determine the average duration of such a civilization in order to work out the number that exist at the present moment.

But what is the duration of such a civilization? If we consider ourselves (the only technological civilization we know) then it is conceivable that we may destroy it tomorrow, even before interstellar travel becomes possible. At least two men in the world can do this any time by giving the order to press some buttons. Perhaps every civilization that gets technological enough destroys itself in fairly short order by misuse of nuclear or other power. In that case, the average duration of such a society may be very short, say 100 years.

On the other hand, we may be a poor example. Perhaps civilizations ordinarily develop without quite the nationalistic fervors and hatreds we have and survive the nuclear danger. They may then utilize their mastery over the inanimate environment to keep their civilization going for eons, let us say, for 100,000,000 years. Perhaps even we poor Earthlings will hang on to sanity long enough to do this.

If we take the pessimistic view, then, the total number of such civilizations now existing is 1/10 (the number formed each year)

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multiplied by 100 (the average number of years of duration), or 10. And the number may be even smaller than that. On the other hand, if we take the optimistic view then the total number now existing is 1/10 times 100,000,000 or 10,000,000. And the number may be even greater than that.

Professor Sagan reaches between these extremes and believes that same technological civilizations survive for extended periods. He feels that it is reasonable to suppose that:

Number of technological civilizations now existing = 1,000,000

If this is so, then one star out of every hundred thousand carries such a civilization, and we can start to speculate further as to the distance by which such civilizations are separated and, in particular, how far away the nearest civilization may be from us.

Well, I have seen it stated that the average separation of stars in the neighborhood of the Sun (that is, in the spiral arms of the Galaxy) is about 9.2 light years. If only 1 star out of 100,000 is inhabited by a technological civilization then that average separation must be multiplied by the cube root of 100,000, which comes out to about 46.5. If we multiply 9.2 by 46.5 and round off the result, we may estimate that the most probable distance between ourselves and the next technological civilization is about 400 light years, or ten times the distance of Arcturus. (Professor Sagan commits himself only to "several hundred light-years.")

Dr. Sagan goes on to analyze the possibilities of practical interstellar space travel. This I will not touch upon because, with my usual frugality, I will save it for another article some time. His conclusion, however, is that interstellar space travel, while difficult and expensive, is possible.

He assumes that such travel will result in contacts between civilizations and in cooperative ventures that will make it possible to pool all the results of Galactic exploration teams and thus increase the efficiency of the ventures. (I would like to point out myself that such a combined Galactic civilization would be more stable and enduring than would any of the individual members.)

Professor Sagan suggests that each civilization can launch enough interstellar exploratory vessels to effect one contact with another planet per year. This means that there are a total number of contacts,

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over the Galaxy as a whole, of 1,000,000 per year and that the number of starships on patrol required to make this feasible is between 1,000 and 10,000 at any one time.

If there are 1,000,000 contacts per year and 100,000,000,000 stars in the Galaxy altogether then, assuming contacts to be made on a purely random basis, each star is visited by a starship once every 100,000 years. If this has been going on at this rate over the billion years or so during which life has existed on Earth, then it may be that our own Solar system has been explored 10,000 times in that interval. Earth's history may be recorded in considerable detail in some Galactic archive far, far away.

But contacts need not be made in a random manner. Once intelligence develops on a planet, the curiosity of the starships may well be roused to the point where contact is made every 10,000 years and once a technological civilization is established, every 1,000 years.

In that case, they may have been 100 contacts in the history of man, and it is conceivable that the last one may have been at the dawn of civilization. Sagan considers the possibility that some human myths may refer not to gods but to extra-terrestrials (and how many times this has been considered in science fiction I hesitate to estimate) but decides that the interlarding of the supernatural is such that almost no conclusions can be drawn.

However, he goes on to say: "As one example [deserving further study], we may mention the Babylonian account of the origin of Sumerian civilization by the *Apkallu,* representatives of an advanced, nonhuman and possibly extraterrestrial society."

I myself have never heard of the Apkallu, but Sagan's reference is to "E. R. Hodges, 'Cory's Ancient Fragments,' revised edition, London: Reeves and Turner, 1876; P. Schnabel, 'Berossos und die Babylonisch-Hellenistische Literature,' Teubner, Leipzig, 1923."

I suggest that it would be a fine piece of research for some Gentle Reader to look up these formidable sources and see what details concerning the Apkallu he can find out. (No, I will not do it myself.)

Professor Sagan suggests that it is even conceivable that the starships have established some sort of automatically-maintained base in the Solar system. This would have to be near the Earth which (with all due modesty) must be their prime center of interest in the Solar system, but not on the Earth where atmospheric weathering and human tampering is to be expected. To be near the Earth but not on it makes it seem that the base might be somewhere on the Moon—one more reason to explore our satellite thoroughly.

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Sagan concludes by suggesting that within several centuries we may be due for another contact and says: "Hopefully, there will then still be a thriving terrestrial civilization to greet the visitors from the far distant stars."

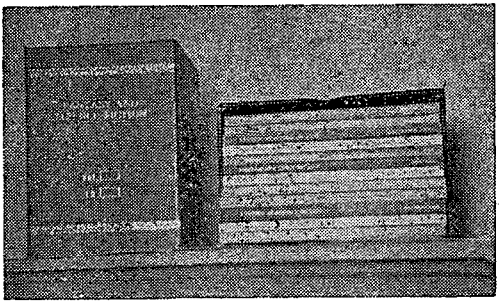
I would like to add just a little bit to all this. Professor Sagan deals only with our own Galaxy, but what about other galaxies?

It is usually estimated that there are at least 100,000,000,000 galaxies in the known universe. Some of them, to be sure, are actively emitting radio-waves for a variety of catastrophic reasons (several have been advanced—and I am reserving them for a future article) and perhaps such fouled-up galaxies are not very rich in life-forms.

But if we estimate that 10 percent of the galaxies are "radio-rich" and "life-poor," that still leaves us with 10,000,000,000 galaxies, each with 1,000,000 technologically advanced civilizations.

This would mean that in the known universe there would be some 10,000,000,000,000,000 (ten quadrillion) civilizations at our level or better. There would be over three million races of beings as good as ourselves or better for every man, woman and child on earth, if they were parcelled out evenly.

There is something to puncture human self-esteem if it were puncturable!



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This is William Bankier's first appearance here since HAWK IN THE DUSK (F&SF, May 1962), and only his sixth appearance anywhere. Mr. Bankier is 34, Canadian, married, the father of two little girls, a jazz buff, a performer on the clarinet and recorder, an advertising writer, and the author of a good-old-fashioned Horror Story, to wit

UNHOLY HYBRID

by William Bankier

WITH SOIL LIKE THIS, Sutter Clay said to himself, it's a wonder the stones don't put down roots and grow. Pressing his long, white fingers into the ground, he scooped up a double handful of damp earth and let it fall in clods and crumbles back into the black furrow.

Why, if I let my hands stay in this soil long enough, Clay continued his thoughts, they'd take root themselves. A thin smile bent the corner of Sutter Clay's pale mouth as he imagined his fingers thrust deep into the nourishing ground while a shiny filigree of roots crept from beneath his fingernails in search of food and moisture.

Good soil had been a factor in Sutter Clay's success as a gardener. No question about that. But there was more of Clay himself in the things he grew than there was of luck or nature, and if thumbs ever really were green, this thin young man would have had one of emerald and one of jade.

The few people who knew Sutter Clay, for he was a lonely man living out here on the edge of town, claimed he could grow oak trees in the Sahara Desert. At the County Exhibition every Autumn, when folks treked out to the Fair Grounds for the harness racing and the midway, those who knew what real wonders were would head for the produce pavilion to see what Sutter Clay had brought in this year. And Clay never disappointed them.

There, spread out in extravagant display as from a cornucopia, lay all the ripeness and abundance, all the browns and greens and reds and yellows of harvest home. Pumpkins the size of carriage wheels lay beneath the

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table lest they split the sturdy trestles that supported the rough planking. Egg plants, almost obscene in their bursting purple opulence; squash in a riot of bizarre shapes and textures; golden ears of corn with the husk shucked back in an immodest exposition of giant kernels straining for a hold on cobs scarcely big enough to hold so many; and even the humble turnip, inflated to the size of a football and ringed about like Saturn with alternate shades of mauve and ivory.

And the hybrids! Clay placed these on a separate table, each strange item carefully labelled with its name and details of its odd ancestry. Here was a cluster of crabapples with translucent skins, clinging to one stem like emperor grapes. Beside them, a bunch of carrots . . . carrots in name, shape and size, but tinted the deep purple of beets. And ranged in rows were ears of spectacular corn spotted with multicolored kernels, some sparse as dominoes, some speckled like terrazo floors, a mozaic of rainbow corn.

And behind it all, jealously watching lest someone touch part of the display, hovered the gaunt form of Sutter Clay, his long wrists dangling inches out of the sleeves of his shiny blue suit, his pale hair spread long and fine across the dome of his head looking like nothing else so much as a swatch of silk from one of his precious ears of corn.

Yes, Sutter Clay could make things grow. He could make them grow bigger and different than they had ever grown before. But there was no denying this deep, sweet-smelling black loam had a lot to do with it. As Clay crumbled a clod, a fat dew worm, belted and banded with rings of copper, humped and glistened between his fingers. He let the cold pulsing worm slip gently to the ground and watched it thread its way into the soil.

"Go, my little cultivator," he said aloud. And as he spoke, a chilly April breeze fanned across the field and touched him through his scanty shirt. The spring afternoon was falling away into the woods behind the house and the pale blue silence of day's end was hanging in the sky.

Sutter Clay stood up and took his hoe and trowel and fork in one hand and his jacket in the other and headed for the house. There was smoke rising from the chimney. He wondered what Bonina would have for him tonight.

She was a girl who had come alone down the highway one night in January when snow whipped sideways past Sutter Clay's kitchen window. The car whose hospitality she had accepted turned off on the Brightsville Road and let her out a hundred yards from the small blue and

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white farm house. On such a night she could barely make it to Sutter's door. Nobody could ask her to go farther.

Bonina Ames was from a city up North. She had no family left and having heard tell of friends in Lauderdale, she had set out down through the mountains to try to find them. Unless something worthwhile happened along the way. She smiled at Sutter with watery round eyes when she said this and would tell him no more. So he never did find out any more about Bonina Ames or where she came from.

But he knew as he looked at her that she was one of the homeliest women he had ever seen. Her head was the shape of a gourd, small at the top where not much hair at all struggled to cover a thin, boney forehead, then bloating and distending downward to an inflated jaw with puffed cheeks and a wide mouth that rippled when she talked and collapsed into a fat pout when she was silent. Her eyes were pale green and constantly wet like sliced grapes. She had, Clay noticed when she stood up, a tolerable body, poorly managed.

Well, there was nothing else for it but to have her stay the night. Then the storm stayed on for another day and a night and so did Bonina Ames. By this time, she was making meals and knew where the dishpan was. When the weather cleared, Sutter never got around to asking her to leave and she showed no signs of gathering her meagre belongings together in the shopping bag which was all she had carried when she arrived. So she stayed, doing a good job of cooking and cleaning, and sleeping in the spare room on a cot that Clay knocked together with some two-by-fours and a spring of chicken wire.

And this was where Sutter Clay found Bonina when he entered the house on that cool April evening. There was a fire in the stove and the kitchen was warm. But there was no pot in sight, nor any sign of activity around the counter top. A sob from the bedroom caught Clay's ear. He went in and stood over her.

"Are you sick?", he asked.

"Not actually."

"Then what's the matter? Where's supper?"

"I just couldn't keep my mind on it. I'm so worried."

"Then something is wrong. What is it?"

She turned over and exposed the bloated face, glistening with tears. Her nose was running.

"Blow your nose," Sutter said.

"Oh Sutter, I'm worried to death. I was hoping all along something would happen. But nothing has. I'm sure I'm pregnant."

Clay put his hands together and cracked his knuckles, suck-

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ing in his pale lower lip. "It was the end of January, wasn't it?", he said.

"Yes."

"Then why didn't you say something sooner? Three months. Pretty hard to do anything about it now."

"I know." She sat up and put her head in her hands. "What are we going to do?"

Sutter Clay looked at her for a moment. Then he said, "Don't you worry, everything's going to be all right."

Into her hands, Bonina said, "How can it be unless we get married?" But Sutter did not hear her. He was on his way out to the porch. Here, he ran his fingers over the shining handles of the implements, selecting, finally, the spade. Then he went back inside.

He found Bonina Ames unmoved, sitting on the edge of the cot, her head in her hands, bowed almost to the level of her knees. Without a word, Clay swung the spade above his head and brought the sharp edge of it down on her extended neck with all the force he could muster. The blow almost decapitated her. She hung poised, her buttocks raised a few inches from the mattress, for a full second. Then she toppled forward against the wall of the room and sank to the floor.

It became a busy night for Sutter Clay. First he went down to the far corn field and used the same spade to dig a pit in the soft, rich earth. It was easy digging, which was just as well since he had to work in darkness. Then he returned to the house, gathered Bonina's belongings and put them in a bundle with the body and carried all together down to the grave. When she was covered over, he spread the excess earth about and broke the ground in the area into a series of furrows. Tomorrow he would plant and that would be the end of it. He would make a point of telling them at the store that his domestic had packed and lit out as suddenly as she had come. Must have been waiting out the winter. No family. No friends who knew her whereabouts. No questions. Let it lie.

And it all happened just as Sutter Clay had planned it. No questions were asked. No enquiries were made. And the warm Summer days came and cast their sunlight and rain on all the fertile seeds Clay had planted in the earth. In the farthest field the corn grew tall, taller than ever, Sutter told himself with a grim smile. Then, with his natural sense of land economy, he planted pumpkins at the foot of the cornstalks.

Thus August followed July, and there was no drought this year. Sutter Clay smiled up into the friendly sky and the sun

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smiled back and gave way to just the right amount of rain at the proper time. Then September followed August and impressed its long, ripening days on the fields which were now becoming heavy with the fruits of the land. Clay busied himself with final cultivation before harvest time but there was little for him to do now. He had done his work. The good earth was now doing her share.

When October arrived it became obvious that this was a bumper year, even for a Sutter Clay. Day by day now, with admirable efficiency, Sutter began bringing in the produce.

"All things bright and beautiful,

All creatures great and small . . ." he sang as he bent to the baskets and trundled wagonload after wagonload to root cellar and kitchen.

It was late October, Hallowe'en was only a few days away, when Sutter worked his way to the farthest field. The corn was superb and he harvested it quickly, selecting superior ears for showing at the Exhibition.

And it was then that he saw the pumpkin. It was not a large pumpkin, about the size of a human head, resting on the black earth over the spot where Bonina Ames was buried. It was the obscene shape of the orange vegetable that stopped Clay rigid in his tracks. The thing was gourd-shaped, small at the top, then bloating out at the base like a gross, misshapen jaw. Above this, two inflated areas puffed out like cheeks and atop the whole unsightly growth there rested a swatch of pale corn silk that hung down in a shiny fringe around the gnarled dome.

Clay could not believe his eyes. Was the stuff actually growing there as it appeared to be? Or had it fallen from an ear of corn during the harvest, assuming this bizarre position to mock him? Sutter knelt down and grasped the silky substance. Then he drew back his hand in horror. The stuff felt more like hair than corn silk, and it seemed warm between his fingers. What hellish hybrid was this?

Later that night, Clay told himself that the stuff was warm only from the rays of the sun. As for the fact that it was growing on a pumpkin, well anything can happen in a garden. He had proved it many times himself. Some sort of accidental cross-pollenation. There was the explanation. Naturally, his imagination had been ready to play tricks on him once he found himself in the far field. He would just go down there tomorrow and root the thing out.

But Sutter Clay did not go into the farthest field on the morrow. Instead, he busied himself cleaning up off bits of harvesting on other parts of the farm. Then he

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went into town the next day and let it be known that he had a surfeit of pumpkins on his land which were free for the taking.

The response was spectacular. By the carload the people came, anxious to pick up a pumpkin or two, what with Hallowe'en only a day away and all. Sutter Clay locked himself in his house while the people were on his land and didn't stir till he had heard the last car depart.

When he did step outside he almost fell over the pumpkin on the porch. Its ugly head was tipped backward so that it stared full up at him over bloated cheeks, and the fringe of yellow hair glistened palely in the vanishing rays of the sun. There was a note slipped under one side of the protruding jaw. Sutter bent down and fished it out, feeling a chill of revulsion as his hand brushed the skin of the thing.

"Mr. Clay," the note read, "this one appears to be some sort of a mixture. We thought you would want to keep it for the Exhibition."

Clay crumpled the note and dropped it to the ground. His first impulse was to kick the thing as far down the lane as his boot would send it. But for some reason, the impulse died. Instead of kicking, he bent down and picked up the pumpkin and carried it into the kitchen. It was surprisingly heavy for only a medium sized vegetable. He set it on the kitchen table and went to find the whisky.

With the bottle of bourbon on his lap and a glass in his hand, Sutter Clay sat near the window in the dusk and stared at the pumpkin on the table. As he drank, the room darkened and with each new wash of grey that overlapped the scene, the malevolant creature on the table took on a new dimension. Where there had been only fat cheeks, now there were tiny eyes; the jutting jaw now had pouting lips, and the whole evil head seemed to shift and frown and cast all manner of rueful glances at Sutter Clay.

By midnight the bottle was empty and Clay had fallen into a fitful sleep. Suddenly he woke up with a start. Was the table closer to him, or was it a trick of the darkness? The murk was now pierced only by a shaft of milky moonlight.

Clay looked at his watch; twelve-fifteen. So, it was now the 31st of October. All Hallow's Eve. A day for torment and wickedness if ever there was one. Sutter Clay stood up and took three unsteady steps toward the table. The last one brought his thigh up heavily against it and set the table rocking on its legs. The pumpkin lurched and moved an inch closer to Clay. He grunted with fear and rage and struck out at it with his fist. Was it more

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imagination or did the thing feel soft and yielding under his knuckles? It was fresh from the field. It should be crisply solid.

Suddenly, Sutter Clay knew what he was going to do. Stumbling to the cabinet by the sink, he fumbled about and found matches and a candle. Striking a light, he dropped hot wax in a saucer and stuck the candle upright. Then he opened a drawer and selected a sharp knife.

Returning to the table, he set the candle down beside the pumpkin and pulled his chair over with one foot. He sat down. Oh, what winking, grimacing faces the thing made now, contorting its bloated features under the dancing light of the candle.

"So, it's a face you want?" Sutter Clay said aloud. "Then we'll give you the one you deserve!" And with that, he plunged the knife full depth into the pumpkin shell.

As he drew the knife out, there was a hissing sound, almost as though a child had sighed, and the room was suddenly full of the fetid odor of the grave. Clay, however, was beyond terror now. Snorting his nostrils clear of the foul, musty gas, he made further incisions in the husk of the pumpkin until he had cut the top off in a clean circle.

Lifting the section off by the hair, he began scooping out the pulp, letting the cold, stringy slime fall writhing onto his trousers and down the legs of the chair. When all was scooped out, he punctured gross, triangular eyes, a small round nose, and a wide, grinning mouth with one pointed tooth hanging down in the traditional Hallowe'en fashion. No jack 'o lantern had ever looked so evil.

"Now, let your light so shine before men," Sutter Clay said as his brain spewed thoughts from a church service of long ago, "that they may see your good works." With that, he took the candle from the saucer, poured hot wax into the hollow skull and set the candle inside. With the fringed cap replaced, the job was done.

Clay pushed his chair back a foot or so and inspected his work. The jack o' lantern guttered and winked and a liquid hiss escaped its leering mouth. Clay slapped his knees and laughed hysterically. The force of the laugh burst against the pumpkin and caused the flame to dance wildly inside the crackling head.

Then Sutter Clay fell silent. For as he watched, the mouth of the creature which had been a mischievous grin sagged at the corners and collapsed into a grievous pout. And two drops of wax appeared at the corners of the triangular eyes and trickled slowly down the golden cheeks.

Clay's lips were dry. He licked them with a tongue that was no

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longer moist. Then, as he watched transfixed, a tiny tongue of fire darted from the corner of the drooping mouth and ran swiftly across the table. Clay could only watch as the liquid fire dripped in a sparkling cascade from the edge of the table and splashed in a pool of sparks on the floor. Fed from above, the pool grew. Then it overflowed and moved across the floor toward the toe of Clay's boot.

Fascinated, Sutter Clay watched as the fire gushed from the livid mouth. He could smell leather burning, but he could not move. Then, as the flames caught hold and surrounded his chair, father and son sat in the burning kitchen and watched each other die.

Down in the town somebody looked at the northern sky and said, "Looks like Sutter Clay's place is on fire." So they called out the fire engine but it got there too late to save anything.

Raking the cold ruins next day, a fireman found the charred husk of the jack o' lantern with its stump of candle.

"Must have been some crazy Hallowe'en prank," he muttered. "What kind of children are we raising these days, anyway?"

ATTRITION

At first the mask adjustment might have been
another art form, comparable to free
tentacle flexing or classic ego
sculpture. We vied for perfect assumption
of imperfection while, beneath our skin,
we remained perfect; that is, until the
insidious inroads of entropy
caused outside wrinkles to ridge the space within,
indenting our daily selves with mimic
depressives. Some of us became careless,
letting the cosmetic chore slide; a few
gave it up altogether and broke
with reality, became legend, as
Gilgamesh did, and the Wandering Jew.

—Walter H. Kerr

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Fritz Leiber has been an actor and is now beginning to attract notice as an artist. After leaving the stage and before commencing to paint, he established his enduring reputation as a writer. He has written fantasies of the past and imaginative stories of the future, has created word-pictures of lands long lost and planets as yet unfound. He has also, however, cast a far from cold eye on life, on death, in our present perturbed times and—instead of riding on—has paused to observe and to comment. His THE SECRET SONGS (F&SF, Aug. 1962) was one such story. Another is this perceptive account of those almost archetypal figures, the overshadowing father and the overshadowed son.

237 TALKING STATUES, ETC.

by Fritz Leiber

DURNG THE LAST FIVE YEARS of his life, when his theatrical career was largely over, the famous actor Francis Legrande spent considerable time making portraits of himself: plaster heads and busts, some larger statues, oil paintings, sketches in various media, and photographic self-studies. Most of them showed him in roles in which he had starred on the stage and screen. Legrande had always been a versatile craftsman and the results were artistically adequate.

After his death, his wife devoted herself to caring for the self-portraits along with other tangible and intangible memories of the great man. Keeping them alive, as it were, or at least dusted and cleaned and even pampered with an occasional change of air and prospect. There were 237 of them on view, distributed throughout Legrande's studio, the living room and halls and bedrooms of the house, and in the garden.

Legrande had a son, Francis Legrande II, who had no more self content or success in life than most sons of prominent and widely admired men. After the collapse of his third marriage and his eleventh job, young Francis —who was well over forty—retreated for a time to his father's house.

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His relations with his mother were amicable but limited: they said loud cheery things to each other when they met, but after a bit they began to keep their daily orbits separate—by accident, as it were.

Young Francis was drinking rather too heavily and trying hard to control it, yet without any definite program for the future—a poor formula for quiet nerves.

After six weeks his father's self-portraits began to talk to him. It came as no great surprise, since they had been following him with their eyes for at least a week, and for the past two days they had been frowning and smiling at him—critically, he was certain—glaring and smirking—and this morning the air was full of ominous hangoverish noises on the verge of intelligibility.

He was alone in the studio. In fact he was alone in the whole house, since his mother was calling on a neighbor. There came a tiny but nerve-rasping dry grating sound, exactly as if chalk were coughing or plaster had cleared its throat. He quickly glanced at a white bust of his father as Julius Caesar and he distinctly saw the plaster lips part a little and the tip of a plaster tongue come out and quickly run around them. Then—

FATHER: I irritate you, don't I? Or perhaps I should say *we* irritate you?

SON: (*startled but quickly accepting the situation and deciding to speak frankly*): Well, yes, you do. Most sons are bugged by their fathers—any psychologist who knows his stuff will tell you that. By the actual father or by his memory. If the father happens to be a famous man, the son is that much more intimidated and inhibited and overawed. And if, in addition, the father leaves behind dozens of faces of himself, created by himself, if he insists on going on living after death . . . (*He shrugs.*)

FATHER: (*smiling compassionately from a painting of himself as Jesus of Nazareth*): In short, you hate me.

SON: Oh, I wouldn't go as far as that. It's more that you weary me. Seeing you around everywhere, all the time, I get bored.

FATHER (*in dark colors, as Strindberg's Captain*): *You* get bored? You've only been here six weeks. Think of me having nothing to look at for ten whole years but your mother.

SON (*with a certain satisfaction*): I always thought your affection and devotion to mother were overdone.

FATHER (*as Romeo, a pastel sketch*): No, son, they weren't, but . . .

FATHER (*a head of Don Juan, interrupting*): But it *has* been a dull time. There have been exactly three beautiful girls inside this

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house during the last decade, and one of those was collecting for Community Chest and only stayed five minutes. And none of them got undressed.

FATHER (*as Socrates*): And then there are so many of me to be bored and just one of you. I've sometimes wished I hadn't been quite so enthusiastic about multiplying myself.

SON (*wincing from a crick in the neck got from swiveling his head rapidly from portrait to portrait*): Serves you right! Two hundred and thirty-seven self-portraits!

FATHER: Actually there are about 450, but the others are put away.

SON: Good Lord! Are they alive too?

FATHER: Well, yes, in an imprisoned drugged sort of way . . . (*From various cabinets and drawers comes a low but tumultuous groaning and muttering.*)

SON (*rushing out of the studio into the living room in a sudden spasm of terror which he tries to conceal by speaking loudly and contemptuously*): What collosal vanity! Four hundred and fifty self-portraits! What narcissism!

FATHER (*from a full-length painting of King Lear over the fireplace*): I don't think it was vanity, son, not chiefly. All my life I was used to making up my face and getting into costume. Spending half an hour at it, or if there were something special like a beard (*the portrait touches its long white one with wrinkle-painted fingers*) an hour or more. When I retired from the stage, I still had the make-up habit, the itch to work my face over. I took it out in doing self-portraits. It was as simple as that.

SON: I might have known you'd have an innocent fine-sounding explanation. You always did.

FATHER: In an average acting year I made myself up at least two hundred and fifty times. So even 237 self-portraits are less than a year at the dressing-room table, and 450 less than two years.

SON: You'd never have been able to do so many portraits except you cheated. You worked from photographs and life-masks of yourself.

FATHER (*self-painted as Leonardo da Vinci*): Son, great artists have been cheating that way for five thousand years.

SON: All right, all right!

FATHER (*being very fair about it*): I'll admit that in addition the self-portraits let me relive my triumphs and keep up the illusion I was still acting.

SON (*cruelly*): You never stopped! On the stage or off you were always acting.

FATHER (*as Moses*): That's hardly just. I never talked a great

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deal. I was never domineering and (*pointedly*) I never ranted.

SON (*stung*): That's right!—offstage you prefered the quiet starring roles to the windy ones. Your favorite was a sickeningly noble, serene, infallible, pipe-smoking older hero—a modern Brutus, a worldly Christ, a less folksy Will Rogers. But no matter how restrained your offstage characterizations, you managed to stay stage center.

FATHER (*shrugging pen-and-ink shoulders*): Laymen always accuse actors of acting. Because we can portray genuine emotion, we're supposed to be unable to feel it. It's the oldest charge made against us.

SON: And it's true!

FATHER (*very kindly, from a jaunty portrait of Cyrano de Bergerac*): My child, I do believe you're jealous of me.

SON (*pacing wildly and waving his arms*): Certainly I am! What son wouldn't be?—surrounded, stifled, suffocated by a father disguised as all the great men who ever were or are or will be! All the great sages! All the great adventurers! All the great lovers!

FATHER (*gently, from the gape-mouth of a gaunt plaster head of Lazarus lifting from a plaster grave-hole*): But there's no reason to be jealous of me any longer, son. I'm dead.

SON: You don't act as if you were! You're alive 237 times—450, if we count four reserve battalions. You're all over the place!

FATHER (*as Peer Gynt*): Oh son, these are only poor phantoms, roused for a moment from the nightmarish waking-sleep of Hell. Only powerless ghosts . . . (*All the portraits cry out softly and confusedly and there comes again the muttering and groaning of the ones shut away in darkness.*)

SON (*overcome by another gust of terror and banging the door as he rushes out into the garden*): They are not! They're all facets of your perfection, damn you! Your miserable perfection, which you spent a lifetime polishing.

FATHER (*from a gaunt-cheeked bas relief of Don Quixote on the patio wall*): Every human being believes he is perfect in his way, even the most miserable scoundrel or dreamer.

SON: Not to the degree you believed you were perfect. You practiced perfection in front of the mirror. You rehearsed it. You watched your least word and gesture and you never made a slip.

FATHER (*incredulous*): Did I actually seem like that to you?

SON: Seem? My God, if you knew how I prayed for you to make a mistake. Just one, just once. Make it and own up to it. But you never did.

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FATHER (*shaking a green-tarnished bronze head across a screen of leaves*): I never suspected you felt that way. Naturally a parent pretends to his child to be a little more perfect than he actually is. To admit any of his real weaknesses would be too much like encouraging vice. He wants to be sure his child is law-abiding during the formative years—later he may be able to stand the truth. Children can't distinguish between black and the palest shade of gray. It's the parent's duty to set as good an example as he can, even if he has to cover up some things and cheat a bit, until the child has mature judgement.

SON: And as a result the child is utterly crushed by this great white marble image of perfection!

FATHER: I suppose that conceivably could happen. Do you mean to tell me, son, that you didn't know your father was as other men?—that he had every last one of their weaknesses?

SON (*a hope dawning*): You really mean that? You're honestly saying . . . (*Then, recovering himself*) Oh, oh, I smell another of your lily-white, high-sounding explanations coming.

FATHER (*still from bronze head, which is that of Hamlet*): No, son! I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me. I was very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I had thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in. I itched to excell at everything. Because my life depended on being the best actor, I was bitterly jealous of everyone's least accomplishments, even your own. I hid my scorn of all mankind under a mask of tolerant serenity—which I had trouble keeping in place, believe me. I lived for applause. During my last years I was bitterly resentful that ill-advised friends and greedy managers did not force me to come out of retirement and make farewell tours. I wronged your mother by lusting after other women, and myself by never having the nerve to yield to temptation—

SON: What, never?

FATHER: Well, hardly ever.

SON: Dad, that's terrific!

FATHER (*modestly*): Well, inspired by the great characters I portray, I sometimes get carried away. A little of them rubs off on me.

SON (*rather breathless*): This puts a different complexion on everything. What a relief! Dad, I feel wonderful. (*He laughs, a touch hysterically.*)

FATHER: Wait, son, I did worse than that. I watched your mother's personality fade, I watched her change into a mere adjunct of myself, and I let it

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happen, merely because life was a trifle easier for me that way. I watched you blunder along under a load of anxiety and guilt and I never tried to get close to you or tell you the truth about myself, which might have helped you, simply because it would have been difficult and uncomfortable for me to have done so and because I —

SON (*concerned*): Now *you* are going too far, Dad. You mustn't blame yourself for—

FATHER (*ignoring the sympathy*): —and because I actually enjoyed your awed embittered admiration. You were such a gullible audience! And then during the last years, instead of turning outward, I lost interest in almost everything except the self-portraits. I poured all of myself into them, finally the life-force itself, so that now I live on in them—a solitary self-created Hell. A human being's punishment for his misdeeds is having to watch and sometimes suffer their consequences . . . but to have to watch them minute after minute from 237 vantage points, unable to take the slightest action, unable even to comment, without the boon of a moment's forgetfulness, a moment's nirvana . . . (*His voice grows ghostly.*) Ten years! Thirty-six hundred interminable twilights. Thirty-six hundred empty dawns. To have to watch this house and garden die. To watch your mother mooning about day after day, wasting herself on memories and sentimental bric a brac. To watch you narrow your life down as I did mine, but before you've even lived it, and all your sodden drinking. To have to observe in all its loathsome detail the soul-rotting, snail-slow creep of inanition . . .

SON (*angry again, in spite of himself, and once more quite frightened*): Well don't belly-ache to me about it. It's your own fault that there are 237 of you, all corroding with life-force—another man would have been satisfied with being damned just once. There's nothing I can do for you.

FATHER (*grinning evilly from the head of Mephistopheles peering from between bushes opposite Hamlet*): But there is. Break us, burn us, melt us down. Give us oblivion. *Smash us!*

SON (*rushing back into house, partly to grab up poker from fireplace and partly because, all in all, the talking portraits in the house are less eerie than those hidden about the garden*): By God, I'd like to! I don't know how often I've thought of this house as a musty old museum, the lumber room of one man's vanity.

FATHER (*a chorus*): *Strike!*

SON (*hesitating with poker lifted above his head*): But they'd think I was crazy. They'd believe that envy of you pushed me over

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the line into psychosis. They'd probably put me away.

FATHER (*as Leonardo again*): Nonsense! They'd merely say that you were ridding the world of some amateurish daubs and thumb-scoopings. *Smash us!*

SON (*veering into argument*): Amateurish is too strong a word. They're not that bad, certainly.

FATHER (*pleased*): You think my work has enduring professional quality?

SON (*frowns*): No, that would be going too far in the opposite direction.

FATHER: *Smash us!*

SON (*raises the poker, but again hesitates*): There's another thing: mother would never forgive me.

FATHER: *Don't bring your mother into this!*

SON: Why not? For that matter, if you've really been wanting oblivion for ten years, why didn't you ask mother to smash you? Or at least to put you all away, where you'd have something nearer oblivion, I gather. Or *give* you all away to people who would either destroy you or provide you with more diverse environments and a more interesting shadow-life.

FATHER: Son, I've never been able to make things like that clear to your mother. Somehow the more she fitted herself to me, the less she was really in touch with me. She was as close to me and yet as far beyond my ken as . . . my gall bladder. I've tried to talk to her, but she doesn't hear. I don't think she even sees my self-portraits any more, but only the image of me—her own creation—which she carries in her mind. But *you*, at long last, hear me. And I tell you: *smash us!*

FATHER (*as plaster head of Don Juan, calling from studio*): Think of the fiery impetuous philanderer imprisoned in the icy rigid statue he invites for dinner. Three girls glimpsed in ten years! *Smash us!*

FATHER (*as the painted Leonardo*): You were always scared to take action. I wasn't!—I expressed myself, even in these miserable self-portraits. Now it's your turn—and your opportunity. *Smash us!*

FATHER (*as Peer Gynt*): Plunge me back in the crucible. Melt me down.

FATHER (*as Beethoven*): Strike a great healing discord!

FATHER (*as Jean Valjean*): Explode the prison!

FATHER (*as St. John the Divine*): Unleash the apocalypse!

FATHER (*a muffled chorus of photographs*): Break our glass, shred us, touch a match to us. Destroy us!

FATHER (*all 237 with the dark undertones of the imprisoned ones*): SMASH US!

SON (*swings up the poker a third time, then lowers its tip to*

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the floor with a smile, his manner suddenly easy): No. Why should I let myself be agitated by a bunch of old pictures and sculptures, even if they do talk? How would destroying them change me? And why should I be intimidated by a dead father, even if he lives on in various obscure ways? It's ridiculous.

FATHER (*once more King Lear*): Have you lost your respect for us? Are you not at least filled with supernatural terror at this morning's events?

SON (*shaking his head*): No. I think it's just my hangover talking with a strong psychotic accent—or 237 accents. And if it really *is* you, Dad, somehow talking from somewhere, I think you mean me well and so I'm not frightened. And finally, to be very honest with you, I don't think you *really* want to be destroyed, Dad, even if effigy—or effigies. I think you've just been getting your feelings off your chest, especially your boredom.

FATHER (*as Peer Gynt, smiling an inscrutable smile, perhaps of relief, perhaps of triumph, perhaps of resignation*): Well, if you can't bring yourself to destroy us, at least stir up this old house, stir up your own life.

SON (*nodding*): There's something to that, all right, Dad.

FATHER: If you don't take the initiative—and moderate your drinking, too—we'll probably start talking again some morning or night, and not nearly as pleasantly, or even sanely. So stir things up.

SON (*seriously*): I'll remember that, Dad.

FATHER (*calling as Don Juan, from studio*): Invite some — (*The voice breaks off abruptly.*)

SON *looks around at the portraits. They have suddenly all gone mum. He can detect no movement in any of them, or changes in their features. The front door opens and his mother comes in excitedly with an opened letter in her hand.*

MOTHER: Francis, I've just received the most interesting request. The Merrivale Young La-

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dies' Academy wants a bust of your father for their library or lounge room. I think we should grant their request—that is, if you agree.

SON (*poking elaborately at the ashes in the fireplace, to account for the poker*): Why not? (*Then getting an inspiration and growing wily*) How about the Hamlet head?

MOTHER: Out of the question—that's his masterpiece. Besides, it's rivetted to its pillar in the garden.

SON: Well, then the Lear.

MOTHER: Certainly not, it's my favorite. Besides, it's a painting, not a bust.

SON (*baiting his trap*): Well, I suppose you could give them . . . No, it's not good enough.

MOTHER (*instantly contentious*): What's not good enough?

SON (*as if reluctantly*): I was going to say the bust of Don Juan, but—

MOTHER: I think that's a very fine piece of work—and an excellent choice in this instance.

SON: Perhaps you're right about that, mother. In any case, I bow to your judgement.

MOTHER: Thank you, Francis. I've never given any of the statues away before, but I think I should begin to. I'll write Merrivale Young Ladies' Academy they may have the bust of Don Juan. (*Starts out.*)

SON: I think you'll feel happier when you've done this, mother. And I think father will feel happier too.

MOTHER (*pausing in doorway*): What's happened to you, Francis? You're usually so cynical about these matters.

SON (*shrugs*): I don't know. Maybe I'm growing. (*As his mother leaves, he begins to smile. Suddenly he whirls toward the portrait of Peer Gynt. It had seemed to wink, but now it presents only its fixed painted expression. Francis Legrande II continues to smile as he hears someone in the studio begin faintly to hum an air from "Don Giovanni."*)

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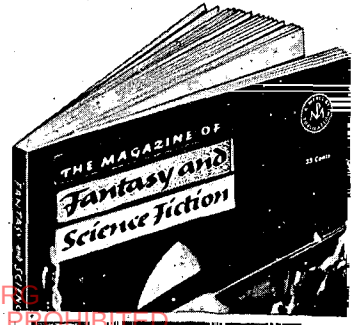

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